



THE CHILDREN
IN THE LITTLE
OLD RED HOUSE

AMANDA M. DOUGLAS



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THE CHILDREN
IN THE
LITTLE OLD RED HOUSE

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AN ODD LITTLE GIRL HAD APPEARED.—*Page 4.*

LITTLE RED HOUSE SERIES

THE CHILDREN IN THE
LITTLE OLD RED HOUSE

BY

AMANDA M. DOUGLAS

ILLUSTRATED BY LOUISE WYMAN



BOSTON

LOTHROP, LEE & SHEPARD CO.

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Published, August, 1912

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THE CHILDREN IN THE LITTLE OLD RED HOUSE

Norwood Press
BERWICK AND SMITH CO.
Norwood, Mass.
U. S. A.

1.00
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THE CHILDREN IN THE LITTLE OLD RED HOUSE

CHAPTER I

THE LANE AND THE CHILDREN

THE man jogging along leisurely reined his horse up with such a sudden jerk that Bonnie looked around with reproachful eyes. The road had been a rather lonely one except for the beautiful old trees standing at the roadside, tall Lombardy poplars and graceful willows that had been growing for years in nature's own fashion. This had once been just a lane to cut off a rather long point in the road, but it had grown into a recognized thoroughfare at this period. The man had not been through it before, and now a curious sound startled him, the sound of a wailing chorus, and he espied a small cottage ahead of him, a little old house that had once been painted red, but was now weather-beaten and dingy.

It was a story-and-a-half house, with the gable-end to the street. There was a door in the middle, with a window on either side, and one in the gable above. There was a large flat stone for a stoop, just a step down from the door-sill, and it left not much more than a comfortable sidewalk. A grand old cherry-tree shaded it, and there was a bed of bright yellow marigolds.

But what made the man halt so suddenly was a group of children huddled together, crying and wailing and rocking to and fro, and from the noise you would have said there were at least a dozen.

He jumped from his light wagon, just said, "Whoa, Bonnie, old girl," and walked up to them with a face of sympathy.

"Children, what is the matter?"

They huddled closer until their heads looked like a cushion.

"What *is* the matter?" and now the expression was anxiety.

They were a tousled group and not over clean, and they looked up in a rather wild fashion. Then with one voice in a most heartrending tone:

"Oh, our mother's gone away and left us all alone!"

"All alone!" He gave a mirthful laugh.

"Why, there must be at least half a dozen of you!"

"There ain't only four. Prim an' Goldie's picking beans, an' Linn's down to the Briggs's, an' Rilla's gone to the store."

"Great Scott! How many in all?"

"There's eight and mother. But she's gone away, an' if she shouldn't ever come back——"

There was another wail.

He laughed, it seemed so very funny. He was a rather stout, fresh-looking man with a decidedly jolly face, clean-shaven, and what seemed to make it merrier was a big dimple in one cheek. His eyes had a laugh in them, too, and were a sort of grayish-green.

"Whew! 'How many—Seven in all, she said,'" quoting from Wordsworth.

"I said eight, and I ain't a she—I'm a boy. And my name's Tip;" indignantly.

He raised himself from a pile of heads. The tears had made rivulets down a dirty face, but the eyes were still lustrous with them.

"And where has your mother gone?"

"She went to a fun'ral. Somebody died—they always do at a fun'ral. She was comin' home at noon and here it's 'most night. An' what if she should die an' never come back!"

4 *THE CHILDREN IN THE*

The howl burst forth again equal to any Irish banshee.

“Children,” with an air of authority in his tone, “you’re too young to be borrowing trouble that way.”

“But she never went away so far before. An’ there’s accidents——”

“Did you have any dinner?” thinking to change the tone of apprehension.

“Oh, yes. Rilla often gets dinner. Now she’s gone down to the store and she took the eggs. She’ll get mother when she comes in the train. An’ Goldie’s going to make a johnny-cake an’ cook some corn.”

“I just don’t want any supper if mother doesn’t come! There, now!”—bringing his little fist down on his knee—“I’m not going to eat a mouthful till she does, if it’s clear to Christmas!”

“My lad, there’d be nothing left of you,” and the man gave his merry laugh again. “Hello! Here’s another.”

An odd little girl had appeared, with a mop of red curly hair, considerably sunburned and freckled, with a plump body, and looking as if she were not much given to trouble, if that was what made Tip thin. She stopped in amazement and looked from the children to the man.

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"We've been tellin' him about mother. An' we cried——"

"Oh, Tip, you must have been born crying! You're good for a drouthy time! And what a dirty lot! Oh, do go and get washed! I'm ashamed of you!"

"Where did your mother go—to what place, I mean?" he asked of the newcomer.

"Well, the train goes to Bridgeville, then you have to walk to Tory Corner. A great lot of Tories lived there in war times. She's a queer old lady—was grandmother's sister. Mother wouldn't have gone only they sent particular word. She thought she'd be home by noon."

"An' she isn't!" Tip dug his knuckles into his eyes and sniffed. "An' if she was your mother and didn't come home I guess you'd cry too, when she's the most beautifulest mother in the world!"

This was addressed to the man, who smiled humorously.

"Please don't mind them, Mr. Man. You're very good to—to ask about her. Oh, children, do go in and wash up! You are a disgrace to the country. It's lucky we live on the back road. People don't often come this way. Mother's all right, I know."

6 *THE CHILDREN IN THE*

The voice was very cheerful and he thought the face quite pretty.

“Well, I don’t see that I can be of any use to you, so I’ll drive round by the store. I’d like to see your mother.”

“Thank you.” She made a droll little curtsy, and he sprang into the wagon.

“A funny lot!” he said to himself. “Eight of them, and one little mother to feed them. I don’t know how many ravens there are that the Lord feeds, but the robins have only four or five in a nest. Gid-dap, Bonnie.”

“Isn’t he just splendid!” Marigold’s eyes distended in admiration. “Oh, I’ll tell you, he’s playing he *was* our father and he’s going to bring mother to us. I’d like just such a father who had a face full of smiles. They don’t often. And we’d go and live in a nice house and have some clothes the neighbors didn’t send in and mother wouldn’t have to patch, and spandy new shoes that fitted you. And I’d choose one of them pretty woolly caps that keep your ears so nice and warm in winter. And Linn could have a blue suit like Charley Deane’s. And we’d have real sweet-cake every night for supper and we wouldn’t have to sell our turkeys at Thanksgiving.”

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Marigold had talked herself out of breath. The children listened in wide-eyed wonder.

"But it ain't real," declared Chan. "There ain't no fairies nowadays and Santa Claus is a fraud."

"No, he ain't, either!" declared Tip angrily. "S'pose it is your mother if your stocking's full and you didn't see it put in——"

"Chan, go and pick me up a lot of chips. I'll boil some corn and make a johnny-cake and have it all nice and hot when mother comes. And, Prim, get the children washed up."

The wagon was out of sight and the children went out to the back shed where the washing paraphernalia stood.

As for the man, he drove along slowly, chuckling now and then, the episode had been so funny. Yet he could not laugh heartily alone. What did a mother do with eight children? "The beautifullest mother." He had never known anything about a mother. For his had died before he could remember, and his childhood had been spent with a careless, rather easy-going stepmother much given to neighborly gossip. When he was ten, a neighbor had taken him to wait on an invalid son, to read to and amuse him. This had given him a fondness for books. Then on the

death of the son he had been bound out to a farmer and had run away from the harsh treatment, begged, worked his way to the city, sold papers, carried parcels, swept out stores and sidewalks until the owner of a factory was attracted by his pluck and earnestness and gave him a chance to learn a trade. He proved trusty, ingenious, honest. It was a factory of small metal articles often patented until superseded by some newer method. He lived prudently. He went to night school and improved himself in many ways. And when he was twenty-four his employer died, leaving him quite a business interest, as neither of his sons wanted it. He boarded simply, he fitted up a part of his office, where he kept books and papers, worked out models, read, and pushed himself along to success.

He was twenty-eight when he married. He had begun to dream of home, wife, and children. He could afford them now. He chose an industrious girl, an orphan like himself. She had saved up a little money and wanted a house of her own even if it left them quite in debt. They found the house, rented out part of it until they had it clear. He was charmed with her prudence. She did dressmaking and went on with her business.

After a little he found it was not the sort of

home he had in his mind. She lived in the kitchen. The little dining-room was a workroom where two girls came to sew. She made him take his lunch, and often a poor lunch it was. He went out for a cup of coffee and sometimes a good bit of steak. Occasionally he proposed to read to her in the evening. She was nowise intellectual. And after awhile she said rather fretfully: "I wish you would read to yourself, Ad. You disturb me when I am planning what I shall do."

He fell into the habit of going back to his office, reading or writing and sometimes dreaming. It would be better by and by. So he made a great effort and cleared the house and proposed they should live a broader life, have in pleasant friends, go out now and then to a play, or take a journey.

Why should they waste their time and money on such foolish things? There was old age to provide for. She didn't mean to end her days in the poorhouse!

He had some lonely, disappointed hours. Then he began to take an interest in the hands. His foreman had three attractive children and he encouraged them to come to the office. He was so fond of children.

He gained courage enough to propose that they adopt a child. Mrs. Mann was aghast!

“Well, I should think, Ad, you must be crazy! The idea of bothering with other folks’ children when we’re so fortunate as to have none of our own. I couldn’t be such an idiot!”

So he dropped into a sort of double life, had a dream house and dream children as sweet and dear as the little Ross children. He took them out sailing on Saturday afternoons, to pretty shows and harmless plays. He bought them toys and clothes, they sat on his knee and put their fond warm arms about his neck, actually kissed him with the sweetest lips. When Christmas-tide came how merry they were, and noisy, too!

He used to stray about the streets occasionally at night and unearth some newsboy, or perhaps homeless waif, and give him a good supper or buy him some shoes or a warm coat. It helped keep the fire of love alight in his heart. The Ross children gained courage enough to climb up in his lap. They had such a cozy home, though it was plain, and the furniture well worn. And oh, what a welcome he always had!

And almost without any warning Mrs. Mann was called to lay down her work and rest from her labor. Only a few days in which she was mostly unconscious, and it was a great shock to him, for she had always been so well and stirring.

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Had she really enjoyed her life? She could have had it very different.

He gave away most of the furniture and offered the house for sale. It had never been a home to him. There were no tender recollections about it.

Some months later a pretty country house had to be sold, on which he held a mortgage for nearly its value. There were two acres of ground. Grafton was one of the home settlements, that spring up so around the country, near railroad stations. After some consideration he determined to start a new life. He was tired of these years of toil and unsatisfactory living. He would take John Ross for a partner; he could not have a more upright man. And he recalled something the man had once said:

“I’ve a life insurance if anything should happen, and I am putting a little in a building loan. But I shall not have a house in the city. I shall go out in the suburbs where I can have a little garden plot and some flowers to cheer my old age.”

Adonijah Mann kept thinking of this as he inspected the really pretty village. There were two straight, long streets and several crossways. It was not laid out in city lots; some plots had four

or five acres; others, not more than two. All along the street young trees had been set out—there was a plank sidewalk. At the end of one street there was a small park with a chapel at one side. Several magnificent trees were in this plot. Indeed, there were numbers of fine trees about, which took off the crudeness of a new place.

This particular house stood back about a hundred feet from the street. The lawn was in a circle with a wide drive around it that also went to the rear, where was a barn and carriage house. A capacious hennery, and a long strip of land with fruit trees and garden spot. Farther back on a rise of ground was a space of forest trees with great clumps of rhododendrons.

Even in late March it looked enchanting to him. The trees really were budding, there were tufts of green grass, and birds were flying about, calling to each other. The man's heart was filled with wonder and such a throb of gratitude that he hardly knew himself. To have all this—to begin a new life in a clean, beautiful, wholesome place! Why, it was like his ideas of heaven!

And the upshot of it was that he bought the place, installed John Ross in his new position, took Mrs. Ross and the children up to Grafton for their May holiday week, for he wanted a woman's opin-

ion of things in general. And Mrs. Ross could give a home such a cozy, livable look, which his former home never had. The former owner had taken what household goods he wanted and sold the rest. Mrs. Ross brought some comfortable things out of the garret and discarded some of the stiff articles that had been considered high art; and straightened, the place looked really inviting.

"I wish it was so you could come here and live," he said longingly. "I think we could all get on so nicely. And I am so fond of the children. You must bring them up in the real vacation."

"Thank you," and she smiled. Then, with a sudden accession of courage, "Mr. Mann, you ought to marry again. Some nice woman—yes, there ought to be children, too." What a pity all his younger years should have been wasted!

There was a general factotum about the place. Dan, whose home was at Denby, where his mother and his paralyzed wife lived. He went over nearly every day to see them, but the Gedneys had wanted him to stay about nights. There were Bonnie, and Jim, the great watchdog, who was only let loose at night to frighten away the marauders, and Bitsy, the funny, ugly little Scotch terrier, and Pilot, the beautiful collie, to say noth-

ing of the chickens and the doves and the magnificent peacock and his plain little hen. So Mr. Mann was busy at first getting acquainted with everything in his wonderful new world.

He thought now and then of Mrs. Ross's remark about a wife. If she had a sister! And he thought of the children, too, but he would like them quite large so they could be companionable.

He was very happy with the spring work, the wonderful bloom and fragrance of everything. Why, he had no idea the world was so beautiful! He spent hours just looking at it, and could never have put his joy into words. He almost hated the two days he spent in the city. Mrs. Ross had found him a nice housekeeper. Her two sons were married and settled, but she insisted that while she was well and able she would be happier earning her own living. She was a fine cook and neat without being fussy.

Nearly every afternoon he took a drive around country ways, finding new delights everywhere. The Rosses came up and spent a fortnight. Oh, what a good time they had! But the children went every summer to their grandmother's, a little seaside place where they bathed and played in the sand, and came home brown and rosy, ready for another year's schooling.

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But he was more lonesome than ever. He went driving round, he called on his neighbors, he even strayed down into the little town of Denby, that seemed very slow and primitive. And this afternoon he found his way through this little old lane and saw the crying children.

CHAPTER II

AMARYLLIS

So Mr. Adonijah Mann jogged along, thinking of the eight children. He wondered if the mother wouldn't like to give away two, one would be so lonesome. Now and then he chuckled as he thought of their wailing. And then he smiled as he recalled the "beautifullest mother." What would she be like? Mrs. Ross was rather tall and slim. There were some nice-looking mothers who sat out on the porches at Grafton, or swung in the hammocks, or held a baby. The mother of eight wouldn't have any time for such indulgences. What a lot of stockings there would be to mend! He had seen Mrs. Ross darning them in her dainty fashion.

He turned into Denby. It had a rather thriftless, seedy aspect. The houses needed painting, the fences needed mending. It looked odd to see the woodpile on what seemed to be the sidewalk. One or two women he passed were doing a belated washing and stopped to stare at him.

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Here sat an old man dozing. Children were playing in the dirt. Then the houses were a little closer. There was a shoemaker, a blacksmith, a wheelwright, and the ordinary country store, with some men sitting outside with their chairs tilted, and a long watering trough at one side.

A little girl came out of the store with a basket on one arm, and a crumpled bit of paper in her hand which she appeared to be intent on deciphering. She crossed over to the other side of the road, which was bordered by trees, and was quiet, seeming more retired. She stood still and read her note. Then she saw the man in the wagon had halted as if he wanted to speak.

He did not quite know what to say, but he had a premonition she was one of the eight. She was clean and tidy, her hair braided in two thick tails below her wide-brimmed straw hat, a plump, cheerful-looking body, yet with a very earnest face.

“Can you tell me—that is”—blundering in an unusual fashion—“when the train will be in?”

“Why—any time now; it is a little late, I think. Were you expecting some one?”

She glanced up with a pretty eagerness.

"No. That is—wasn't your mother coming on that train?"

"My mother!" She looked up in surprise. "Yes, she was to come, but I had this letter," holding it up in her hand. "She can't come until to-morrow. It is something about a will. But—how did you know?"

"I was going by and saw the children. They were so disappointed and crying I thought something dreadful had happened."

"Oh, Tip must have started that; he's the biggest cry-baby. Mother says he could wring a quart of tears out of the eye of a needle."

Such a pretty, wholesome laugh as she gave!

"And then did you come down here to find her?" she asked with a winsome smile.

"That was in my mind, yes. And now—won't you jump in and ride back, for you have had one quite long walk."

"I'd be very glad to," she said frankly. She did not know enough to be suspicious, and she liked his face.

"Oh, thank you!"

He held out his hand and she sprang in lightly. "It's very good of you," she added, and the gratitude in her soft brown eyes went to his heart.

"Do you know much about wills? Here's

mother's letter. I hope she won't have to stay any longer."

He felt a little delicate about reading it. It was a pencil scrawl about what the lawyer had advised, as she was one of the heirs. The last few lines touched him.

"Poor old Aunt Hitty! For forty years she's lived alone. I'm gladder than ever that there are so many of us. Don't get lonesome without me. I'll surely come to-morrow. Your dearest, lovingest mother, with a kiss to you all."

"Of course your mother has had something left to her. I'm very glad. How long has your father been dead?"

"The twins were born in June, five years ago, when the roses were all out. Father had just painted the house and it looked so nice. Mother cried over the babies, she said there were so many of us. But father said it was just right, or God wouldn't have sent them. And oh, we had such a time over their names! We're all named after flowers, and father used to call us his garden. He was working then for Mr. Briggs, and they were building the stone fence, trying to get a big stone in place, when something happened to father. I don't remember what he called it, but

something gave way and they couldn't stop the bleeding, and poor dear poppy just grew weaker and weaker and died."

The child wiped her eyes and gave a long sigh, and he was deeply touched.

"You see we'd never been close to anybody dying before. And it made us all so lonesome. And the children somehow had a queer feeling about mother's going to Aunt Hitty's funeral. But God will take care of her. I don't think He would let anything happen to her when we need her so much."

"You can trust Him to take care of her, I am sure," he said earnestly, and from the depths of his heart he breathed a prayer for her safety. "And I hope your mother will get something worth while."

"Don't they always in wills? But she said she didn't want Aunt Hitty's old house—you saw that in the note—as it was just ready to tumble down. We couldn't go anywhere else. And Mr. Briggs is very good to us. He takes our fruit to market, and our poultry, and gives us our milk. Linn drives the cows to pasture and goes after them. And he pays him for some other things."

"It's odd, but I don't know your name," smiling down into the child's face.

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"It's Amaryllis Firth. And there's Marigold and Primrose, and the twins are Rhody and Laurel. Mother wouldn't have Rhododendron, it was too long."

"I should think so," and he laughed.

"And the other name is Firth. And the boys are Linneus and Chandler and Tip, whose real name is Harrison. Will you tell me yours?"

"It's Adonijah Mann. I suppose they gave me a long front name as a sort of balance to the other."

"Mann. Well, that's rather funny. Isn't everybody a man?"

"Yes, but there's an extra *n* in my name. And I live over at Grafton. Do you know where that is?"

"Oh, yes, but it's too far to walk. And how many children have you?"

"None at all. And my wife died. Now I have no one to put in my pretty house."

"Oh, I'm very sorry for you."

She said it with deep, honest feeling.

"Don't you think you could lend me one or two?" he asked.

She studied a minute or so.

"You wouldn't want the twins unless you had a mother to take care of them. And Tip—well,

I think he'd be lonesome and cry after mother. Mother says he's very showery. Chan is a little lame and not much good, only he tells us very funny stories after supper when we all sit around. He makes animals talk. Mother says she don't see where he got such a head full of stuff and how he could guess what they think."

"Then I fancy Chan would be entertaining."

"It ain't really true, you know. Chan don't tell it for that. But we have a little book in which they talk, and Chan says he knows they talk to each other, only we can't understand them. And our kitty will talk to you as if she was answering what you said. Chan's lame and mother thinks he grows worse."

"What happened to him?"

"They were out chestnutting. Chan could climb like a cat. But he fell out of a tree and bruised his hip dreadfully. He couldn't walk for some time. The doctor said he'd outgrow the lameness, but he doesn't. So you wouldn't want him."

The touch of pathos in her tone went to his heart. Wasn't it the poor and unfortunate that were especially commended to one's kindness?

"And we couldn't spare Linn. He's working for Mr. Briggs through vacation and he's going

to pay mother in things we shall want for the winter. And Goldie's such a help to mother, and Prim can work in the garden like a boy, and she's a master hand with the chickens. You would laugh to see how she bosses the hens when they are hatching. I do think they know what she says to them. And she's so fond of the little chicken babies."

The child laughed with a kind of pleasant satisfaction.

"Then I don't see that I stand a chance to get any of you."

"Oh, I think you're just funnin'! You see—well, I can't quite explain what I mean, only if there wasn't any mother, and there never had been any children, a man wouldn't know what to do with them. Sometimes they're bad and bothersome. Now we turn in here. Oh, there they are, coming to meet mother!" She waved her hand.

They certainly had a great fashion of huddling. A funny group on a sort of jog-trot. Then they stopped suddenly and wailed: "Where's mother?"

"Children!" Rilla leaned out over the side. "Mother had to stay, but she sent a letter and she's coming to-morrow."

"O dear! O dear!"

“Tip, I’m ashamed of you! You are the biggest cry-baby! Mother’s all right. Didn’t she say God would take care of her! And this nice man gave me a ride. I was very tired. Oh, I am so much obliged to you!” smiling on him.

She sprang out in the lightest fashion before he could even think, so intent was he on the group of children who hovered around her like a flock of birds.

“Yes, children,” he began, recovering his wits a little, “your mother is all right and she will be home to-morrow at noon. Mind what your sister tells you and be good children. I will go down for your mother to-morrow and bring her home, and see that you have a good dinner.”

He thought that quite a masterly effort, and he handed out the basket, which the curly, red-haired child took.

“Oh, thank you a thousand times!” and Rilla tried to extricate herself. “And will you truly go for mother? It’s such a long, warm walk in the middle of the day.”

“I surely will. No, don’t worry any; and, Tip, there’s nothing to cry about.”

“Maybe you’d cry if you hadn’t any muver for two whole nights.”

And *he* could not remember that he had ever had a mother!

It was a good five miles to Grafton, but he laughed now and then, and said: "It's as good as a play! And I was feeling a bit lonesome. Eight children!"

It was late when he reached home, and Mrs. Alden apologized for the stewed chicken that had gone mostly to shreds. She made such delightful gravy with stewed chicken.

"Oh, never mind. It's always good," he said cheerily.

Afterward he went out on the porch. Dan sat on the lowest step of the porch, with the collie's head on his knee.

"Dan, do you know anything about the family living in a little old house on that bit of cross-road?"

Mr. Mann was rather democratic, and sat down on the step just above Dan.

"With a dozen or so children?"

"Only eight, Dan."

"Oh, a few more or less don't matter. The father's dead."

"Yes—what was he like?"

"Well—ruther queer—not a bad sort, either."

"Sober?"

“Oh, yes, straight as a hickory sapling and honest as a summer day is long, but one of the kind who seems never to get ahead.”

“Was he a native of hereabout?”

“Oh, no. You see, Bessy Chandler taught the school over to Cross-roads, the old school. She was purty as a rose. And this David Firth came from somewhere—he wasn’t a dandy, but he seemed somehow as if he belonged to the upper crust. Well, they married. Her grandmother died a few years afterward; he’d fixed up the place some and was going to raise flowers and fruit. Granny died and she tied up the place to the children so they couldn’t go away. And somehow they seemed to get along, children and all. He worked around for the neighbors, could paint a house and mend up furniture, but he was always bewitched with flowers. I s’pose he ought to have been somewhere else where he could have made it pay. He did raise some splendid fruit and grafted trees for the farmers round. Then working on Farmer Briggs’s stone wall he got strained and bled to death, the doctors said, and bein’ inside they couldn’t do anything for it. Everybody was awful good to them that winter—and there were twin babies that had a plaguey sight better stayed out of the world. But she’s

a smarter! You wouldn't think it to look at her."

"The beautifullest mother" ran through his mind.

"And she takes care of them?"

"Yes, manages to. Women seem to have more idees than men. It would have swamped a man and he'd had to put the children out. She sews round. And they have some fine fruit—Farmer Briggs takes that to market. They raise a lot of chickens and they seem to have eggs when no one else does. Pete Graniss was hotfoot to marry her last year, but he wanted her to put the four younger ones in an orphan asylum. And if it wasn't for the raft of young ones she could marry almost any time when a man loses his wife."

Mr. Mann laughed. Then he said gravely:

"She is a good woman."

"As good as gold."

Presently Dan gave a long yawn. His pipe was out and it was his bedtime. So he wished his employer good-night and scuffled off.

Adonijah Mann lapsed into a sort of reverie. More than once he had wondered if following out his sudden fancy had been wise. True, when he took his day in the city he was glad to get back to the loveliness, the fragrance, the rest of the

pretty little half town, half village. The space all about, the cheerful dining-room with the flowers on the table and a bowl full of them on a little stand by the window. The fine white drapery and the portières at the doors, the clean matting with a few rugs laid about, the easy-chairs in sociable-looking places. No one to fret if he laid down his paper and went to get something. Even Pilot and Bitsy came in now and then, and the little dog had a cushion in the corner. As for the great out-of-doors, no words could describe it. He could feel it in every pulse of his body, and though he had not formulated any special idea of heaven, he thought it must be like this. He hoped his poor wife had her eyes opened to the glory of it.

After the Rosses had gone there was a lonesome kind of feeling everywhere, a sort of conscience-smitten feeling. Had he any right to all this ease and pleasure and beauty when down yonder hundreds were gasping for a breath of fresh air! Ought he not bring some of them out here and refresh their famished souls and bodies? Last week he had stopped at the Orphan Asylum that he had visited several times and left twenty dollars that the children might be taken out on a trolley-ride. He had watched their faces brighten

when the pleasure was announced. And he wondered whether he would like a girl or a boy better?

Some one surely ought to be here. There was no relative he could think of—no friend—he had made so few except in a business way. And somehow his heart went out to the poor who had no friends. He wished he had more.

The neighbors had been formally social. In small settlements like this they hold off a little until they get at one's true standing. It is not always the money. He used to watch them as he came up from the station; they were often out on the porch. A few of them had children—one family had two fine boys, about ten and twelve, who would come down to meet their father. And though kissing was a reprehensible and an unhealthy habit, besides being out of date, they nearly always kissed him and each took a hand as they walked up. Next door one side was a stylish middle-aged couple. They had invited him in to play whist, but he didn't play cards. On the other side they had a little girl of seven or eight, who was always beautifully dressed and sat in a pretty little rocking-chair holding a doll. Did she never care to run and play? he wondered.

There were two oldish men, brothers, living

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down at the end of the block, and the blocks were long, that he had become quite friendly with. Both were bachelors and had rather an objection to children. He was foolish, no doubt, but he wanted something young and sweet, with clinging, caressing arms.

CHAPTER III

THE MOTHER OF EIGHT

ADONIJAH MANN was down at the station early. It was an ugly place all about, quite as ugly as some of the city's marts, only here there was no bustle of business. A grist-mill—a carpenter shop with an attempt at a lumber yard—some old boats lying at the dilapidated dock. There was not much business at Denby—farther down, Ridgewood was quite thriving.

The train came screaming along as if there were a great deal to do. Some boxes of freight, a sewing-machine for some one, a pile of empty bales and baskets, and a little to put on. One passenger coach. Two men jumped out, then a lady in black with a mourning veil, rather shabby and dusty, and with a parcel done up in rough brown paper. She gave timid glances about and took two or three steps forward.

"Mrs. Firth, I believe," he said somewhat hesitatingly.

"Yes. Oh," in a frightened tone, "has anything happened——"

“Nothing, nothing, ma’am,” with a wave of the hand. “I met your little girl down here yesterday and drove her home. Then I saw all the children—no, one boy wasn’t at home. And I told them I’d come down for you to save you the long walk through the sun.”

There was a sudden cloud of dust in the road, and out of it emerged a small, barefooted boy with his trousers rolled above his knees and the brim of his straw hat broken in several places. His gingham shirt *was* dirty, but he flew at the slight figure with a force that nearly threw her over.

“Oh, mommy! mommy! We’ve missed you so! And we thought—if you never came back. And Tip’s kept the twins crying ’most all the time!”

“Oh, Linn, dear”—he was smothering her with the most unhygienic kisses—“of course I should come back. God wouldn’t let anything happen to me when you all needed me so much. There, child—oh, you must excuse him”—to the interested spectator. “You see I’ve never been away since——” and her voice had a tremble in it.

“I s’pose this is the man they talked about who brought Rilla home. And the pretty horse——”

Linn's face was redder than the heat had made it, and he suddenly hung his head, abashed.

"Yes, my lad," returned the cheerful voice. "And did you come down to meet your mother?"

"Not exactly. Mis' Briggs wanted some spices and I said I'd run down to the store. I knew it would be about train time. All the same, I did want to see mother," caressing her hand and patting it against his hot cheek.

"Well, if you could squeeze down between us——" and Mr. Mann seemed to make room.

"Oh, no, sir. I'm all dust and dirt. And I'm glad to have you take mother. I'll soon run back. Thank you all the same," touching his hat rim.

Mr. Mann handed in his guest and spread the laprobe over her as carefully as if she had been gowned in silk. She pulled out her veil and flushed as she noted that her glove finger had given out. And she almost wished he had not come—what would the Denby people think! But after they passed the store it did not make so much difference.

"I don't know how used you are to children," Mrs. Firth began deprecatingly, "and we have so many, and in the summer clothes get soiled so

easily; children, too," ending with a faint ghost of a laugh.

"I've never had any. My wife didn't seem to care for them, and now she's dead. I am alone in the world. There was a stepmother and some second children in our family, but they strayed off, I don't know where. I live at Grafton, though I've spent most of my life in the city and at business. But I had a notion for something different, and this place seemed to come to me."

"It's a very pretty place, sort of a suburb to Ridgewood, isn't it? Husband went over there several times to lay out grounds and plant trees. It is, well—rather for the quality. And we're such very plain folks here at Denby. It's scarcely changed since I was a girl—they are mostly old farmers, only they have built a new schoolhouse over there"—nodding her head to the eastward. "And that is the old church that has been here a hundred years. Up above is a nice little town—Rowaton. And there's Ridgewood. Round about here it's all farms, and it doesn't seem as if people were real ambitious."

"You used to teach the school, I heard."

"Yes, that was long ago. They had a man one year who boarded round, and I had a few little folks in my house. Grandmother was alive

then. The man didn't seem to get along, and no one else would come for the money. I taught four years, and you learn a good deal by teaching. Then they built the new schoolhouse, and you had to be examined in lots of new things I didn't know about. I didn't care much, for Mr. Firth wanted to marry me. But afterward I had some of the A B C children at my house. Mr. Firth had been educated. We couldn't go away on account of grandmother, you know, and he could turn his hand to 'most anything. So we lived along, and the babies came, but when grandmother died we found she'd left the place to the children when we were dead. She wouldn't hear to our going away, and that was what we meant to do when she was gone. And there was a little money that was to pay the taxes. So we just went on, and then he was hurt. Things happen mysteriously in this world, and you can't 'count for it. If we could have gone away *that* wouldn't have happened to husband."

It did seem as if fate had made the master-throw in her life.

"I hadn't much opinion of wills after that. If you want anybody to have the good of a thing give it to them out and out, while it is of some service. Still we've been glad and thankful that

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we've had a home, and the taxes paid seven years."

"I hope this new will was satisfactory," he said in the pause.

"Well, it really wasn't worth staying for. Not that I had been counting on anything. There's a grand-nephew—and four grand-nieces. He's run the farm for the old lady and kept her in everything. It's a big farm, a hundred or so acres, and that's left to him. The house is only an old shell. Then the clothes and bedding and furniture and dishes are to be divided among the nieces in equal value. The old lady never was married. She was grandmother's sister."

No, there didn't seem to be much hope for any fortune in that, and he really was sorry.

"It's a shame," he commented.

"Well, you see I hadn't been lotting on anything, and I can't say I was disappointed. Mary Jane was, awfully. She used to run in and do things for the old lady, and it seemed as if she ought to have had some recompense, and Eliza Ann thought the farm ought to be divided. I was tired of hearing them wrangle. And now the surrogate has to do something to the will——"

"It has to be probated."

"Well, if I get some extra blankets they'll be

good for winter. Mine are getting pretty well worn."

She gave a soft little laugh that seemed somehow to come from a light heart. You wouldn't think of her being pretty at first, but there was a subtle sort of sweetness, an elusive flavor that you sometimes get in a perfume, compounded of many things, the cordial smile, the uplift that was courage and hope transfused together. The brown eyes had a kind of liquid light, as if the sun was shining back of them. Most people spoke of her as being small, but she was quite medium size as to figure, but the head had a rather proud poise and the features were fine. In spite of children and hard work she had not grown old, and there was no sign of discouragement in her face or voice. Before he had reached the little old red house he echoed Tip's designation—"The beautifullest mother." That was what she had been to the children just in motherly duty, making no special virtue of it.

The children were out watching; even Rilla left her cookery and came wiping her hands on her checked apron.

"Oh, my dears!" she cried, and the little hands almost dragged her out before Mr. Mann could alight.

"You see I've brought her home safe. Now what are you going to pay me?"

The small faces were aghast.

"You didn't say anything about pay," declared Chan, with sudden courage. "You just said you'd surely bring her home."

"I wasn't a bit sharp about bargain-making, was I?" and he laughed.

"I'll div' you my dolly," proffered Laurel, who looked at least a year or two younger than her twin, and was backward about talking plainly; but her mother liked the baby words.

"Oh, Laurel, for shame! That dirty thing!" and Prim snatched it away and threw it toward the house. Then it was Laurel's turn to cry. Tip looked at her in disdain.

"Never mind, dear, the gentleman will know it came from your heart, and that it was something you cherished. Everybody wouldn't want to give away what they loved best. You're not used to children," turning to him, "so you must excuse them. And I am a thousand times obliged to you. Marigold, you might get him a posy."

"And if you don't object I'll come over some day and take the younger ones out for a drive. Occasionally I get a sort of lonesome feeling."

"Oh, you are very good!" and Mrs. Firth raised her soft, sweet eyes.

Marigold handed up the posy. Some roses and very beautiful china pinks.

"Though I suppose you have plenty of flowers——"

"But these are wonderful La France roses! Why, they are really finer than mine."

"Father used to take such pains with them. You see, I've only such a little time, and then I don't know about them as he did," Mrs. Firth said deprecatingly.

"I must come over and look at the garden. Thank you. And now—be good children."

He was going to add "and love your mother," but he knew there was no need, and he had a strangely awkward feeling as he drove away. He would like to know them real well, but he didn't just understand how to get about it. They would go out in the kitchen and have some dinner, never dreaming that for years he had eaten in the kitchen off cheap, common ware, hurrying through his meals.

Then he wondered about the little lame boy. He looked more delicate than the others. Couldn't something be done for him?

Eight children for one little mother! And so

many houses where there were no children! And so many children in the asylums! So many little waifs never knowing what love meant. Why, he had not really known how much it was to them until he had come to know the Rosses intimately.

Not that these children had any lack. But what would the little mother do when they began to grow up? They would have few chances for education, few opportunities for advancement. They all seemed so bright, too. But often it was the helping hand that assisted one in finding his place. A helping hand had been held out to him. He had seen the possibilities in John Ross. And now—why, there were hundreds of people in the world who needed this kindly assistance, who might be useful and honored instead of dropping down in discouragement. The children were to be the next generation of men and women.

The little group left behind watched the wagon out of sight in spite of the old adage of bad luck.

“Isn’t he just splendid!” exclaimed Amaryllis. “But such a funny name! Mr. Mann! Of course he’s a man.”

“Oh, Tip, do let go! You’ll drag the clothes off me and tear my veil, like as not!” said his mother, unclasping the small hands that seemed to have so much strength.

"Me, too, mommy! Me 'ants a hug," and Laurel caught her skirt.

"Children, let me go and change my dress. It's my best one, and goodness only knows when I'll get another. And then I'll tell you everything. I'm glad enough to get back, just as glad as you are."

She made her way through the group, but Rilla ran in to look after the dinner, as there was a suspicious smell of beans burning. On one side of the hall were two rooms, both used for sleeping apartments. The front one was the larger, and had an old-fashioned, much-carved, high-post bedstead and a trundle bed that was pushed about halfway under in the daytime. A bureau, an old cedar chest, and two chairs completed the furniture. The floor was painted and some rag rugs laid down beside the beds.

She took off her hat and brushed the dust out of that, shook her veil and folded it carefully, laying both in the chest. Then from the closet she took her everyday calico gown and hung her black one out of the window, meaning to look after it presently.

"Dinner's ready," announced Marigold. "Oh, mommy, you can't think how lonesome it was last night. And that owl came and hollered."

“Well, you weren’t afraid of the old owl!”

“Not afraid, of course——”

Linn came in breathless. “Oh, I hoped you wouldn’t have eaten your dinner! Mis’ Briggs had a b’iled dinner with everything in it, and it was lickin’ good, I tell you! And she said, ‘Linn, you just run over home with this chunk of pork.—It’ll go good.’”

This room was quite long, and was sitting-room and dining-room, with the lower end devoted to kitchen purposes, though in the summer they cooked out in a sort of shed kitchen. The table was covered with an enameled cloth, the dishes were a rather motley array, but the children were all clean now.

As Linn was talking, he uncovered the kettle at Rilla’s elbow and she took out a tempting piece of pork, at which the children set up a shriek of delight. They were never quite as badly off as the old woman’s children, for they always had bread if they did not have broth. But meat was more of a rarity. It looked appetizing enough set in the great platter of green beans and corn.

“And how about the fortune, mother! They were all crazy to know over to the store.”

“I don’t think there’ll be much fortune. One of the cousins takes the farm. And she’s to have

a monument out of what's left from the burying."

"Jiminy! That's kinder tough, after getting you over there and keeping you. But say, didn't you go off in style! That Mr. Mann bought the Gedney place right in 'mong the 'stocracy, Jim Perkins said, and he goes to New York two or three times a week to do business. Wasn't it funny that he should stop yesterday——"

"It was 'cause I cried," interrupted Tip. "We sat out there wishin' for muver, and I said, 'Let's all cry, 'cause we're so lonesome.' And we just cried as hard as we could."

Mrs. Firth laughed—she could just see how they looked.

"And you won't get anything! Now that's what I call hard lines. And—and mean," the boy said with spirit. He had been making considerable of it in the store and he felt suddenly mortified.

"There are some things to be divided, and I'll get my share. It's an old tumble-down house, much worse than this, and good for nothing. Cousin Joe Rice takes that, though he may get enough for a barn out of it, and the things are to be divided among the four grand-nieces."

"Well, I must run back. Mis' Briggs wanted

to hear, and she'd like to have you Tuesday of next week."

"Yes, I'll come. Thank her for the pork."

They enjoyed the meal like healthy, hungry children. Then the dishes were washed, the room put in order, and they went out on the big stone step to hear about mother's journey and the cousins.

"There's Martha Rice, Joe's wife, and they have four pretty fair children; then Jane Brown has one poor measlin'-looking little girl, homely as the wrong side of a stone fence, and thin, straight black hair that makes a fright of her. I must say that I think black hair makes a scarecrow of a child. Then Mimy Blake has two clumsy, awkward boys with the queerest carrot-colored hair. Then Eliza Armstrong is the great lady of the town; her husband has a grist-mill, and though she's no children she made a great fuss about the will. Joe's wife has been looking after the old lady, but the poor old lady didn't have any sense for months at the last, and Eliza's very sure Joe planned out all the will, only it was made years ago. I didn't think I had any say about it, and I do hope they won't send me any old furniture and make me pay for carting. And the way they talked about my eight children was

something dreadful, seeing as they've never been asked to find them food or clothes."

"We could have done without the twins," Rilla said softly.

"Well, I don't know," subjoined her mother. "Father was so proud of them. No one had twins hereabout. And we've got along so far and I know the Lord will help us pull through. I wouldn't dare to say there were too many of you, lest He should take one of you away."

"Mother, if you had a chance to give one of us away, which one would it be?"

"Oh, Chandler! Give one of you away! I'd work my fingers to the bone first! And think how nice it will be when you are grown up! Why, we will almost be a little town by ourselves. And then you'll marry. Why, I wouldn't worry about things as Lizy Armstrong does, and she hasn't a chick nor a child. Well, I don't know about the chickens."

Chan wanted to say, "If you did give one away it had better be me, for maybe I'll not be good for very much." He felt he was not outgrowing his hurt as the doctor had predicted. He couldn't walk as well as he did a few months ago. The hip-joint felt wobbly and it often pained him, especially at night when the others were asleep.

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But he cried softly, lest his mother should hear, when it was very bad.

“No, there isn’t one too many,” declared foolish little Mrs. Firth.

That evening she had to tell it all over to Linn, and somehow he felt dreadfully disappointed that there wasn’t any fortune. For his best suit was getting outgrown, and maybe he couldn’t go to school the coming winter. He did like studying. There were so many wonderful new things that his mother did not know about, although she helped him in a good many ways. If that farm, a hundred acres or more, had been sold and the money divided round! And how splendid Mr. Mann’s life must be, going in to New York to business just as it suited him, and driving round the country whenever he liked!

CHAPTER IV

DREAMING IN THE TWILIGHT

THEY all sat out on the wide doorstep this summer evening. Their mother was away again; she had gone to the parsonage, where they were keeping an anniversary of the minister's marriage. Mrs. Burnham always called in Mrs. Firth when there was anything extra going on. She had such a deft, quiet way, her manners were much more refined than those of the other two women who made a business of lending a helping hand in sickness or any unusual occasion. She could arrange a table so prettily, she never jostled the guests as she went around, or slopped or broke any article. Denby people, as a general thing, thought her a very nice person. It was because she had taught school, and what had possessed her to throw herself away on David Firth and have eight children was a mystery! That the Firths had gotten along quite as well as some of the slipshod farmers who had only half the number of children was seldom taken into account.

True, she wouldn't be home until quite late, but she would bring a basket of "goodies," and they all wanted to sit up and see. Rilla was darning stockings. Marigold was knitting winter ones for the twins out of some clouded red yarn a neighbor had given them. Primrose was spelling hard words and beating them into her breast with a vague idea that it was the abiding place of memory. Chan sat further out on the smooth ground in his small rocking-chair. He could give himself a little twist in it that eased up his hip. Tip had his head in Marigold's lap; Linn had been playing "cat's cradle" with the twins.

It was not dark yet, though the soft gray of twilight was stealing over the sky, and there was a lovely breeze from the south.

"There!" Prim exclaimed, "I've spelled 'tetrarch' six times with my eyes shut. I bet no one will catch me on that again, though I do always want to spell it tea-tray, for there's a picture of her comin' in with a great dish held up high that looks like a tea-tray. It's horrid, too."

"Her—who?" asked Chan.

"Why, that dancing girl. I hope we won't have it for a Sunday-school lesson until I am grown up, and I won't go that Sunday. I just hate it!"

"Oh!" returned Chan, without understanding a bit.

Marigold was counting off the stitches for the heel, before it grew too dark to see. She could go on well enough afterward.

"Don't you think it queer," she began, "that we've never seen that man since the day he brought mother home, and he was so jolly and asked us all to ride, you know. Why, I liked him so much. Do you suppose he was just funning?"

"He couldn't 'a' took us all in that little wagon," declared Tip.

"But he might have taken us in twice," remarked Primrose, with an air of superior wisdom, "and the twins could have sat down in front."

"It wasn't a bit nice of him," said Marigold. "Grown-ups ought to keep their promises. What are you laughing at, Rilla?"

"Oh, something I thought of, and it's wrong to laugh at anything in the Bible, and a text, too."

"That's funny," returned Linn. "Let's have it."

"I don't know how I came to remember it—I nearly always forget the text. But the Sunday mother had the toothache and she gave me particular charge, the chapter and verse just slipped out of my mind, but the words seemed sort of

queer to me and they stayed. It was: 'Put not your trust in princes nor any child of man.' "

"And he's a child of man," said Linn, unconscious of a pun. "What a queer name!"

"I think you ought to trust princes," declared Marigold, in a rather sentimental tone. "They have plenty of time and money, and they can study up nice things, and have servants to send about, and all that. Poor people have to work most of the time. Oh, I think I'd like to be a princess or a queen!"

"Golly! you aim high," laughed Linn.

"Oh, let's think what we would do if we were all rich," suggested Primrose eagerly.

"I'd keep my word to a lot of poor children when I'd promised to take them out riding," said Chan gravely.

"That's almost equal to the yard of black pudding," laughed Linn. "Think of something worth while! I'd like to have millions. Then I'd go to a first-class school and get an A No. 1 education, and I'd study up the thing that would make the most money. I'd have a grand house and pictures and beautiful things——"

"But if you had all that money," interrupted Prim, "why would you want to make any more?"

"Well, maybe I wouldn't. Yes, I'd like to own

a railroad and travel round in my own private car and boss lots of men. And then at great meetings I'd tell them how I was a poor little barefooted boy that ran around doing errands and had to wear patched clothes and things. I've read about 'em. And they most always do begin poor. Now, Rill, it's your turn."

"Oh, I don't know," said Amaryllis, "except the beautiful house, and mother shouldn't go out to work any more."

"I know what I'd do," announced Primrose triumphantly, "I'd have a greenhouse like those you read of in father's old books, and all manner of lovely flowers. When you grow them from little bits of things they seem like babies, and you could hug and kiss 'em, they're so sweet, and you can get lots of money for 'em."

"That's the thing!" cried Chan. "And you'd take me in, wouldn't you, Prim? For if I was lame I could get about in a greenhouse. But if a fairy came and gave me a lot of money I think I'd try to find a first-rate doctor and see if he couldn't do something that would keep my leg from slipping back when I walk. It's that that makes me wabble so."

"Oh, yes, you should come," assented Prim.

"Dolly and Dicky," and Linn gave the twins

a squeeze, "what would you do with a big lot of money?"

"I'd buy a beautiful big doll with eyes that shut and real curly hair, and a carriage to ride it round in," said Rhoda.

"That wouldn't cost a million. Now, Dolly?"

Laurel hugged her doll closer. Her clothes had been washed and her face and arms made over, which you can do to a rag-doll with no expense.

"I'd buy a red bank like Taty Burnman."

"Do try to say Burnham. Then what would you do with it?"

"Why, I'd put my money in it."

It was getting quite dusky, but Linn laughed down into the sweet surprised blue eyes, and kissed his baby sister.

"Tip, you haven't said a word. Wake up," and he nudged the child. "You haven't spent your million."

" 'There was an old man in Kilkenny
Who never had more than a penny.
He spent all that money in onions and honey,
This wayward old man in Kilkenny.' "

"As if I couldn't get onions out in the back yard," returned Tip disdainfully. "I'd get a real gold watch, and I'd have a horse and a great big carriage, and we'd go riding every day. And I

wouldn't be like the man; I'd take out some children who didn't have any carriage."

"Three cheers for you, Tip; and now the great question is: How are we to get the million?"

"Do you suppose Mr. Mann has a million?" asked Marigold.

"Oh, no. A million is a great deal of money. Ten hundred thousand. I don't believe any one in Grafton is worth that, and I heard Mr. Briggs say he gave seven thousand for the house and grounds and some of the furniture. But it's a very tony place. They don't allow any little cottages built. If we were set over there in the midst there would be consternation!" and Linn laughed heartily at the thought.

"But we couldn't," said Tip, "unless the witches took us through the air."

"If we only had a lamp to rub," sighed Chan.

"But we haven't anything only each other and mother and this little old house and three acres of ground. Well, after all, that's quite a good deal," said Amaryllis, with a cheerful sound.

"And isn't Dolly asleep?"

"Sound. Shall I carry her in?"

"I ain't sleepy," declared Rhoda.

"But you wouldn't want to stay out here all alone?"

"No. I'd be afraid of a big tiger."

"There ain't any tigers," said Tip disdainfully.

"There is too so, in my Christmas book! And if they got out——"

"They'd eat us all up for sure."

Rhoda ran in, catching hold of Linn's shirt-sleeve. Rilla lighted a lamp, then she found the children's nighties and soon had Laurel in bed. The only sound she uttered was a sleepy grunt. Rhoda made no demur at following. Chan was tired and thought he would go, too. He slept on a cot by himself and Tip shared Linn's bed. The two older girls went upstairs, where there was a nice airy room with a window at each end.

Amaryllis went back to her pile of stockings. Some were cut-down ones and did not stand much wear. The boys often went barefoot.

"I'll have a nice lot against winter," said Mari-gold, "for when we get to school there won't be so much time. Oh, Rilla, if we only *were* rich; and then think of Mr. Mann not having any children to buy clothes for, though we don't really *buy* much," with an odd little laugh. "Shoes are the worst, and you have to get pretty good ones for winter wear."

"It doesn't seem quite right, Goldie, that one person should have so much and no one to spend

it on. I'm disappointed, somehow. I liked him so. There was something so good in his face and he had such a jolly sort of voice, and he seemed so interested in us."

"And that beautiful dimple! I just wish I had it in my cheek! And if my hair wasn't red! I do hate to be called 'carrots' and 'bricktop,' and then that I should be named Marigold!"

"But your hair is so dark I think it will be brown when you are grown up. You know mother said when she was little they called her 'tow-head,' and now see how dark it is; and yours is so soft and silky. I just envy you about half the curl in it. I mean to keep the twins' hair curly. They say you must just snip off the ends and never cut above the curl, and that's what I mean to do. I do so love curly hair."

Linn thought he would go down to the parsonage and walk home with mother and carry the basket. Rilla had all the stockings mended, and then she took up Prim's speller and went over the hard words at the back. She wasn't quite sure she could go to school this winter. Mother was out so much, and she really did like the house-keeping.

It was past ten when the two returned. Linn set down the basket with a thump.

“We can give a party ourselves,” he said, with a gay laugh. “And Mis’ Burnham would make me come in and eat up some of the fragments. I’m just stuffed!”

“They had a splendid time,” began Mrs. Firth, “and some nice presents. A beautiful tablecloth and some silver knives and forks. Theirs were getting quite worn out, and Mrs. Benson sent a little bureau and a rocking-chair that had been her Sophy’s, because she said they were kind of idols to her and made her long for Sophy instead of being glad Sophy was in heaven. And such a good time as everybody had. The choir sang, and Deacon Gates made a nice speech and said he was glad the minister let them come in and keep the feast with them.”

“Oh, what a lot of cake and biscuits! and the ham is just lovely! And these little brown things——”

“Croquettes they call them, but they’re a bit of hash rolled round and fried as you do doughnuts, though why they should call them that—and I’m just tired as a dog. I’m glad I don’t have to go out to-morrow.”

“And we’re glad too, momsey dear. Now I’ll put the things away and we’ll go straight to bed.”

So presently it was all quiet in the little old red house, and the old moon came and looked in the windows, and the man smiled with the part of his face that hadn't turned quite around yet. But he didn't find any fault nor frown because there were eight children.

Meanwhile, what had become of Mr. Mann? The day he had gone for Mrs. Firth was his day to be at the factory, and when he went the next day he found things at sixes and sevens, whatever that is.

Mr. Ross was really ill with a fever. There had come in quite a large and unexpected order. Two excellent workmen had gone on a spree and then refused to work unless they could have a raise in wages.

"And you know you said in the spring you would never take them back if they went off that way again! Well, they did Fourth of July, but pretended to be so repentant and begged me not to say anything to you, so I gave in, but this time they were so obstreperous that I told them to go. It made us short-handed, but work sometimes slacks up in the summer. Then this order coming in the first of the week—I've had the fever about ten days now, and I thought I'd work it off, but

I'm afraid it has got the best of me. I'm awful sorry——”

His face was flushed a dull red, his eyes were heavy, and his voice shook with the effort of talking.

“Oh, why didn't you telegraph at once! Now you must make ready and go down to Westerley immediately, and I'll look after things. It's time you had a vacation. What have I been thinking of! Laziness makes a man selfish!”

“You've been very good to me, Mr. Mann, and I'm sure you deserve a nice time on your own money. I should have sent if you had not come in this morning.”

“Just go over the order with me, and then consider yourself laid off for a fortnight, at least. I'll run down and see how you get along. Don't worry about anything. See the doctor at once.”

So he started Mr. Ross off and telegraphed to Dan not to expect him home at night. He found things had fallen behind. The order was from some new people who might be very profitable customers he saw, so he supervised the workmen with keen eyes, though some of them were glad to have the old boss back again and were spurred up to their best. They even agreed to give up

the half-holiday on Saturday on the proffer of double wages.

He was very glad there was a late train on Saturday, and it was nine at night when he reached home, tired and heated through and through. Oh, how delightful the fresh and fragrant air from the firs and hemlocks and blooming flowers and emerald grass was! Why, life was worth fifty times more here. Pilot was wild with joy and Bitsy frolicked so that he could hardly cross the porch, and there was his refreshing bath and a simple supper and delightful tea.

"I shall have to stay all next week," he explained to Mrs. Alden, "perhaps longer. Mr. Ross is in for a bad time, I am afraid. He should have given up sooner. And you see the trains do not run to oblige the working man, and I must be there at seven in the morning. But I've found a comfortable boarding-place—so many folks go away in the summer they are glad to take you in. It's rather funny to turn in and work, though," laughing. "See how soon a man gets spoiled!"

"It's pretty tough to begin in August weather when you've been out of the harness for months. I'm powerful sorry for Mr. Ross. Fevers at this

season are bad things. You don't think it is typhoid?"

"Well, it would take a doctor to tell that. You see, this order coming as it did made him very anxious, and being short-handed made more real work for him. You can't always get a first-rate man at short notice. I've often wondered why men didn't try to come up to the best and get higher wages instead of staying at the bottom of the line."

Dan had everything in order and had gone home.

"Don't bother about breakfast," he said to Mrs. Alden. "I may like to sleep late, and a cup of coffee and some of your nice bread will answer. Have dinner at the usual time. I'll take a drive in the afternoon, and go over to Ridgewood for that eight o'clock train that doesn't stop here."

"Dear! dear!" she ejaculated, "I just pity your having such a break-up in this hot dog-day weather."

He woke early—his chamber fronted the rising sun. The birds were singing not quite with the June morning gayety, but it was sweet, a Sunday melody softened a little; Chanticleer, too, with his shrill, clear call, and another at a distance answering. There were the lambs also, grown much

steadier on their legs. Oh, how delightful it all was!

Then he turned over and took another nap, since there were no city noises to disturb him.

But it really seemed when he went around his small farm as if he had been gone a month. Over on the back fence-line there were some new wild flowers coming out, asters, milkweed, and one great purple thistle whose life he had begged from Dan.

"Let it bloom," he had said, "but cut off the flowers before they can seed themselves. It is so long since I have seen one in bloom. And there were great yellow daisies, black-eyed Susans they used to call them."

The dinner was fine. There were his own luscious peaches for dessert, so fragrant that they scented the room, and a saucer of late raspberries, sweet and fresh, a treat indeed.

About four he would drive over to the Firths. Dan had been instructed to put the two-seated surrey in order, but he wouldn't take them out to-day—maybe that wasn't quite a Sunday treat. He wanted them to have some fun when they had the ride.

Just as he was going to call to Dan he espied two gentlemen coming up the street. They were

about of a size, one a little stouter than the other; they had the nattiest of gray cloth suits, the smoothest of high silk hats, and each carried a gold-headed cane. They paused, then with a half nod came up his walk, and he knew they were the bachelor brothers, Peter and Ira Con-sadine.

“Good-afternoon,” began Peter, who was the stouter one, and not very stout either, only Ira was a little thinner. They both had that curious, well-preserved look as if they had been laid away in spices but had not quite reached the mummy stage.

“Good-afternoon, Mr. Mann. I’ve been saying to Ira for a month or more we must be neighborly——”

“Yes, we must be neighborly,” re-echoed Ira.

“We’re not the kind to rush headlong into an acquaintance. It’s best to go slowly, to learn what kind of person your neighbor is likely to be, for you know there are people you never can fraternize with.”

“That you never can fraternize with,” added Ira.

“And I said: ‘We’ll see how they keep the place.’ We are very neat people, Mr. Mann, and I must say Linden Avenue is a street to be proud

of. All the tenants are of the refined and better class."

They had ascended the porch steps by this time. There were some large armchairs, and Mr. Mann said, "Will you walk in or sit out here?"

"Oh, out here. We are great believers in pure air. It is bad enough to be housed up all winter, though we endeavor to have every room thoroughly aired every day. But it seems more social to be out of doors in the summer; 'there is such a variety.' The clouds are continually changing, the wind moves among the trees, and the branches sway never twice alike; and the trees on this avenue are very fine. We haven't allowed them to be hacked and trained until they are no longer the trees God meant them to be, but mere traves-ties. Nature knows pretty well what she is about, I take it."

"It is a beautiful spot," remarked Mr. Mann.

"Yes. It was a great farm and meadow in the time of my ancestors three and four generations back. The Consadines settled here more than two hundred years ago, and the Bradleys, the Uphams, and the Geers have all married in until they were like one great family. They laid out the town at Grafton, and in my father's time much of the property was divided, and some thirty years

ago this was planned for gentlemen's residences, people who had retired from business or given up their farms, or come from cities for quiet and where they could be sure of not having the shoddy element jostle them. There is so much of that now in the world, sir. Men who began life as errand-boys, or ditchers, or what-not, getting rich and aping their betters; men who haven't even a grandfather to fall back upon. We try to keep clear of that sort of gentry."

Mr. Mann was amused. What would they say if they knew he had no pedigree to fall back upon?

Then Mr. Peter Consadine gave him quite a detailed account of his family, and his forbears in England that seemed to go back to William the Conqueror.

"We have the whole tree down to the present time. When you do us the honor to come over you will be interested in seeing it, and we have some family portraits two hundred years old, and silver of Queen Anne's time. I think we shall donate the curiosities to some historical association, seeing we are the last of our branch. A man ought to marry and have sons to succeed him, but there is such a risk in bringing up sons nowadays. One cannot approve of modern education. It does not make

gentlemen or gentlewomen. And if you had a son that insisted upon going to business or out on a ranch to mingle with cowboys, your heart would be torn with anguish. So we never quite dared——”

“No, we never quite dared. Women are so different from the time of our mothers.”

So the two old gentlemen prosed on, giving this one's and that one's pedigree and virtues. They were not captious gossips; indeed, it seemed as if all of their acquaintances were of the way-high-up sort and possessed of all possible virtues.

Then they rose to go, and said they had enjoyed the call very much, and cordially invited Mr. Mann to return it, which was quite a compliment, for they had decided if they had not found him admissible they would not continue the acquaintance.

He laughed a little as the two dapper old gentlemen trotted down the street; but it was too late then to go over to the Firths.

Mr. Mann was at his post early on Monday morning. Two of the workmen had kept Sunday in such a fashion that they were good for nothing. One was very impudent and was discharged. The other turned penitent and promised to come the

next morning "straight as a string." Late in the afternoon word came from Mr. Ross that was not encouraging, so Mr. Mann put his "shoulder to the wheel," as the saying is, and made it go around with a rush. It was well that he understood just what was to be done or they would have been in a sad plight. He would look up a first-class man, such as Mr. Ross had been to him. So he did not go home all the week. One night he spent at Westerley, and found that the rest and fine sea air had begun to improve Mr. Ross, and that the fever was abating. They were so glad to see him that he went down again and spent Sunday.

"You've economized rather closely and done too much yourself, Ross," he said. "I think I have found a fine young fellow, a first-class machinist, and I have settled upon his being foreman. You need some help."

"But I don't want to rush ahead too fast. You must not lose anything by me, for helping a fellow to a good standing-place. It isn't everybody who finds such a friend," and he pressed Mr. Mann's hand.

"Well, working and saving isn't everything in this world. I've had five and twenty years of it, and now I've taken up the other tack. It isn't

as if I had a family to provide for, but sometimes I feel myself a lonely old fellow."

So a fortnight passed, and he had not had a glimpse of the children in the little old red house. Maybe they were thinking he was a sort of fraud and didn't mean half that he said.

CHAPTER V

A DAY OF HAPPENINGS

"YOUR fortune has come," announced Linn, as he returned home Friday evening. They were all around the table eating what Primrose styled "their frugal meal." Marigold had made a pot of cornmeal mush that always came in handy when the bread ran short. There was some nice chicken gravy, some molasses, and now some milk, so they could make three courses with it.

"Is there a trunk full?" asked Rilla.

"Trunk full!" disdainfully. "Well, I should say! A great bundle sewed up in some old bed-ticking, and it looks as if it had come from an old garret, sure enough."

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" were the ejaculations in various keys.

"You mustn't look a gift-horse in the mouth, I've heard," Marigold said sententiously.

"Oh, can we go to wide on the horsey?" and Laurel turned her spoon upside down on the tablecloth, which, being of the enameled kind, did not suffer much damage.

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"There isn't any horse, Laurel. Pay attention to your supper and don't muss."

"One dollar and thirty-one cents, ma'am," announced Linn, in a very business-y tone. "Mr. Briggs will bring it up to-morrow morning when he goes to Fairfield. I hope it will be worth the money."

"O dear," sighed their mother, who had just five dollars and meant to invest it all in shoes.

"And school begins a week from Monday, the tenth. How many of us are going?" asked Linn. "Don't all speak at once or you might bewilder me."

"You must go," said his mother, "and you must have some new shoes. You have really out-grown yours. You complained of them on Sunday."

"Yes. They pinched. They can be handed down to Chan. See the economy of having a large family. Nothing need be wasted."

"I don't believe I want to go to school," Chan remarked slowly.

"Well, I do," cried Prim, "and it's such fun to slide down Cressy's hill in the winter. And Mari-gold and——" she looked up at the eldest sister.

"I wonder if you can be spared," the mother said, in a perplexed tone.

“No, I can’t, if you’re going out to work, momsey. Oh, I wish I could earn some money!” exclaimed Rilla.

“You will by and by, you’re so handy about sewing.”

“And I just hate sewing,” announced Prim, “except carpet rags when they’re good and long and you’re trying to see whose ball will get done first.”

Mrs. Firth laughed. Then she looked serious. She had hoped somehow she could give Amaryllis another year’s schooling. And poor Chan—could anything be done for him? He was getting thinner and she noticed he was not ready for play any more.

“What do you suppose is in the bundle?” asked Marigold.

“Seven old dresses that were young in the days of Methuselah, six petticoats, ten nightcaps, and—what else do old women have, mother?”

“Well, if the dresses will cut over——” began Rilla.

“They’ve some such fine new things in the store—Mr. Beers was down to the city yesterday. Calicoes with red roses in them, little bits of ones, and some blue plaid things——”

“Oh, I wish I could have a whole new pretty

dress!" exclaimed Goldie. "I'd like a red cashmere, it's so soft and warm. Come, children! Twins, you must go to bed before Rhoda falls out of her chair and cracks her crown or smashes her nose."

"I ain't sleepy," protested Rhoda. "An' I want a new red frock——"

"It won't do for us all to be in red," declared Goldie. "Though Mrs. Kane bought a whole bolt of that brown and white gingham and had her four girls dressed alike, and it washed horrid!"

"Faded, you mean," said her mother. "Everything washes."

"Well, I wish it would wash itself—clothes, I mean," commented Rilla. "If we could have a washing-machine! It would be as easy as churning."

"I don't think churning easy, by a long shot," declared Linn. "I churned this morning and I thought the butter never would come. Oh, and I was to bring home a kettle of buttermilk. I'll run over with it to-morrow morning."

Goldie put the twins to bed and lay down beside them to tell them a story about a cat that had three wonderful babies, and fell asleep herself. The others kept on wondering what was in the

big bundle, and made enough out of hopes to clothe the family for a full year.

Linn ran over early with the buttermilk, and Mrs. Briggs sent a piece of boiled ham with it. He hung around a little, and presently espied Mr. Briggs, and they all ran out to welcome a very much soiled bedtick bundle tied about with clothesline.

"I'll pay you the railroad charge," exclaimed Mrs. Firth, "and——"

"You're welcome to my carting. If I was a railroad you'd be welcome to t'other as well. I hope it's something wuth while. Mean that your part wa'n't in money."

"I'm obliged to you for the good wish as well."

"Oh," said Chan, with a laugh, "if you owned a railroad you might give us a ride now and then, free gratis for nothing."

"That I would, you better believe."

It made quite a break in Mrs. Firth's five dollars, and though she smiled she sighed inwardly.

Then they cut the rope, the knots were too hard to untie. There was another wrapping in a coarse homespun woolen and tow blanket, and then there fell out a motley collection that tumbled over Laurel, who was standing too near, and she gave

out a frightened wail. Goldie rescued her from under the avalanche.

"O dear!" sighed Mrs. Firth, as the children pulled out various things.

"See here!" exclaimed Linn. "Why won't this make a nice coat for me? Feel how good and thick it is. Oh, I'll try it on."

It was a woman's coat of dark gray. It came down to his heels and his arms were lost in the sleeves. Chan gave a mirthful shout, then said: "And you can will me yours. Mine can descend to Tip."

"Right you are. There's nothing like having some one to take the clothes you outgrow."

"Oh, see here!" Goldie pulled out another cloak, a blue and black plaid with some straight breadths plaited on a yoke. "Why, this will make me a splendid dress!"

"I once had a cloak like that. It had been mother's," said Mrs. Firth.

There were several woolen blankets, there were gowns and petticoats, and two shawls, some old shoes, and about ten pairs of home-knit woolen stockings. Aunt Hitty had left behind her fifty pairs. Two silk gowns that the girls went wild over, but they had lain so long that they were spoiled with yellowish spots and cut on the folds.

“And what’s this—something hard sewed up in—well, I guess it’s towels. What can it be?”

That was soon determined. A sugar dish and cream jug of something that looked like silver.

“Why, it’s just like the teapot you have, mother, and it makes a set. I can shine it up, and if we ever should have company to tea—any one beside Granny Keen or old Mrs. Betts—and oh, two silver spoons!”

“Yes. Those are Britannia ware. Grandmother sold her two pieces to a woman who went half crazy over them and offered her a big price. Yes, you can make them look like real silver. And oh, my! Here are two black dresses. They are faded and shabby, but I may be able to get one good one out of them. The sleeves of mine are about gone, and I’ve taken off the bottom of the skirt a time or two. I’m thankful for them. And those blankets will come in good this winter. Oh, yes, I guess we’ll have the money’s worth,” with her soft, cheery laugh. “But I don’t see what some of the cousins will do with such a lot of old stuff.”

“Maybe they sent you all the old truck,” suggested Marigold. “You see, where there’s eight

children almost everything will come in handy. Only you'll have to wear all the stockings, as they are grown-up ones."

"Oh, you can save some for me," proposed Linn. "Golly! ain't they good and thick. They'd be the fellows to run through the snow with. And now I must be off. Mother, don't you suppose you could get me some new shoes? Mine are so short now that I have to turn my toes under. I'll be parrot-toed."

"I'll see. Children, carry these things up in the garret. See how late we are with breakfast, and it's Saturday, with ever so much work to do. Now do get along, and if you'll all turn in and help I'll make some buttermilk cookies."

They each took a pack and groaned as they ascended the rather steep attic stairs. It was all one big open garret with a window at each end. The girls' bed stood at the front, and Amaryllis had made it quite an inviting room. The back part might have compared with old Aunt Hitty's garret, but sometime in the winter they generally cleared it up and cut carpet rags from the odds and ends that were good for nothing else.

"Oh, see here, what a nice big shawl!" cried Rilla, with an armful of the "truck." "Mother, it was what you were wishing for all last winter.

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Washing wouldn't hurt it. The things smell garret-y."

"We'll air them out good when we have time. Why, the shawl is a perfect godsend to me. I won't need to put an interlining in it," and she laughed cheerily.

They finally had the place cleared, with no worse mishap than Tip falling upstairs and crying as usual.

"But if you had fallen down you might have broken an arm or a leg, and think how much worse that would have been!" consoled Primrose.

"Or you might have broken your neck," added Chan. "And think what a misfortune that would have been. You couldn't cry any more."

Tip sat and rubbed his knee and considered.

Presently they gathered around the table with tremendous appetites and begged they might have some of the ham that came last night.

"For you see," expounded Chan, "that's clear gain. We were not looking for such a thing."

"I thought I'd save it for Sunday dinner," said his mother.

"Sunday we sha'n't work much, but now we have worked like Trojans. Who were the Trojans, Rilla?"

"I think they lived somewhere in Greece. And

there was a great war—— Oh, I wish I knew lots of things. We'll ask Linn."

After they had breakfast, Chan and Tip went out to clean up the chicken-house and pull some weeds. Chan could always get more work out of Tip, for he generally spiced the labor with some wonderful stories about birds and animals.

"Do you suppose they ever did talk?" asked Tip.

"Why, yes. Don't Billy and the hens hold numerous conversations? The trouble with us is that we don't understand hen language, nor bird language, but we do know mostly what Tabby says."

Billy was the big, handsome Chanticleer.

Indoors everybody was busy. The twins were set out of doors with their playthings. The bread was molded up and put in the pans, the beds made, the floors mopped up, while the bits of carpet were hung out on the fence to air. The cookies were made, and how nice they looked with the molasses and ginger, "good enough to eat raw," Primrose said. But oh, when they came out of the oven the fragrance was enough to make one's mouth water!

"What 'mells so dood?" asked Laurel, coming

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in. "We'm playin' company. We'm dot our table all set an' Dolly had a bad fall and dot her cheek all bu'black. An' doctor's tomin'. We 'ant some bread an' some pie an' some—some——" looking around and snuffing up the delicious odor.

"Oh, cake! some little teeny cakes!" Rhoda was the smartest of the twins. "Oh, do let's have some an' we'll be good—all next week."

The mother laughed. "Yes, you shall have one all around. I'm sorry dolly had such a fall. Is she badly bruised?"

"Drefful! I must hurry back. Maybe it's fever'n ager."

Were there ever such good cookies! They had cinnamon and nutmeg in them and a soda biscuit rolled very, very fine that did duty for an egg. The boys brought in a great basket of lima beans, and after the feast they had to wind up with the crusts of the fresh bread which Chan declared were "'licious."

By noon you would hardly have known the place, it was so spick and span. There was some bean soup and a great dish of beans, and the corn was boiled on the ear. Rilla washed up the children and had put the twins in their chairs when Linn ran in red as a peony and all out of breath.

"Here's a letter. Pete brought it up from the

store. Do you suppose they want all those old traps back? I'll bet it's the two silver spoons!"

"A letter?" Mrs. Firth took it between surprise and fear and studied the address.

"Oh, do open it!" exclaimed Rilla impatiently.

She tore off the end of the envelope. The inclosure was rather curiously folded, the ends pasted up. When she had worked these open something green fluttered out to the floor.

"Oh, golly! It's five dollars!" and Linn picked it up, dancing round crazily.

"Five dollars!" Mrs. Firth dropped into a chair and felt as if she should faint away. All the children crowded round with: "Let's see! let's see! Is it truly money?"

"Don't tear it to pieces, children." Then Mrs. Firth began to read her letter.

It was rather stiff and formal, but the gist of it was that a man traveling round the country in search of old things had spied out the great awkward, high-post bedstead and the bureau and had offered thirty dollars for them, which was just five dollars apiece, as the things in the house were to be equally divided. Mr. Rice was going to alter the old house into a barn and build a new house now that he had disposed of the old truck. Not one of them would give the old things house-

room, so he thought he had made a good bargain, but surely his hair would have turned white if he had known what the purchaser obtained for them. Here was her share of the proceeds, and would she acknowledge the receipt as soon as possible?

“Hurray! Hurray!” and Linn danced around, whirling the note over his head. “Momsey, it’s grand! worth the dollar and thirty cents. Now I can surely have my new shoes!”

“O dear! Come to dinner, children. I’m clean bewildered! I’m sure I never dreamed of such a thing.”

“But I did!” declared Tip. “I’ve dreamed and dreamed of that ’ere pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, and there ain’t been any rainbow in ever so long.”

“You had better come and dream over an ear of corn,” returned Primrose, laughing.

“Well, I must run back,” said Linn. “Momsey, can I tell them about it?”

“Oh, yes.” She was beginning to feel quite proud over a legacy of real money.

The bean-soup was splendid with all the things in it. Mrs. Firth might have written a cook-book on soups alone, she could vary them so and always have them palatable.

The lima beans were delightful, although they

didn't have a lump of butter in them, but she dredged in a little flour, and the corn was sweet and soft. One by one the children fell out, not even having room for the dish of peaches Marigold had brought in.

Then the dishes were washed again, and the children had their bath and were put in their next week's clothes. After that they had to be careful. Chan took his rocking-chair out on the grass-plot and his fairy-book, so battered it hardly held together, and read aloud. Prim sat on the grass, knitting. Tip was down on his stomach wiggling his toes in the grass. Marigold was upstairs examining the treasures.

"Oh, isn't it just splendid!" Amaryllis was hugging her mother and dropping kisses on the white forehead. "Five dollars that you didn't have to earn, mother dear! What a day it has been!"

"Yes. I ought to go down and get Linn and go over to the store. I hate to have his feet so crippled, and he may get corns. And Chan can take the shoes. I'm clear full of thankfulness. I don't think I could hold another thing to-day."

Rilla thought of one more joy she would be glad to hold. If they could know about Mr. Mann and that he was not "funning" when he prom-

ised them the ride. He was so different from the farmers about, and she knew now, as Linn had heard, that he was truly a rich man. Of course he really couldn't care for them, there were so many, and the house was old and shabby, and—and—she winked hard——

“Hello! hello!”

Wagon wheels crunched but could not drown the sound of the merry voice. She sprang to the window and wiped her eyes on her apron. How warm it was!

There he was in the midst of the children, and had Laurel in his arms, and there was such a hubbub you couldn't distinguish a word, only Prim's clear voice saying:

“We thought you were never coming any more.”

Had they really thought about him? A warm throb shot through his heart. Oh, what eager, charming faces!

“I've been away. Where is your mother?”

“Mother! Mother!” called a chorus of voices.

She smoothed her hair a little and took off her apron. Somehow Mrs. Firth never looked really untidy.

“How do you do, madam? I hope you didn't lose faith in me. I've had to be in the city on

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business and looking after my sick partner, and this is the first chance I've had to keep my promise about the ride. And now we'll go off on a regular picnic, if you are willing. I've brought a lot of goodies along."

"But——" Mrs. Firth looked at the children. Yet she was glad they were clean and decently dressed, even if Tip and Chan were barefoot, and the twins were barelegged. They both hated stockings in the summer, and it saved in more ways than one.

"There are no 'buts,' madam. Bonnie's had a week's rest and feels fine and frisky. A good load will steady her a bit. Have you all been well? Why, you look like a garden of blooms. And here's my flower girl."

He came and shook hands with Amaryllis, and she blushed up to her eyes, ashamed of the rather hard thoughts she had had about him.

"But you can't take them all?"

"I must go yidin'," and Laurel clasped her small arms about his leg and he caught her up again.

"I love 'ou." She laid her soft cheek against his and he kissed the rosy mouth.

"Oh, children!" began their mother.

"We haven't much time to spare, you see. I

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had a number of things to look after before I started. Now how shall we get you packed in?"

"You never can take them all!"

"Well, let's see." He had the two-seat surrey with the canopy top. "The two boys—and this is Marigold, isn't it?—can sit on the back seat. Then this one with her knitting is so small—and——" he looked over at Amaryllis.

"I'd rather the twins would go. You gave me that nice ride, you remember——"

He arranged the three on the back seat, and lifted up Primrose. "There's room for you, too. If you have some cushions we can put the twins down in the front——"

"If you didn't mind, I'd like Rilla to go to the store with me this afternoon, and I think you'll have load enough without her," began the mother.

"Yes," rejoined Amaryllis, with a soft, persuasive smile.

"Then I'll have to take you and your mother some other time." Her sweetness touched him.

They hoisted up the twins. Primrose placed her arm about Rhoda. Mr. Mann seated himself and put Laurel between his knees.

"Now, children," said their mother, standing beside the carriage, "be good and don't make any

trouble. I'm sure I don't know how to thank you——”

“Don't you worry about that, nor them. After being in a factory for a fortnight I'm ready for a lark. Why, you never know how splendid the country is till you've had to stop in the hot, noisy, dirty city with all its sights and smells. It's like getting into heaven. And now where shall we go?”

Marigold's eyes were eager. She wanted to say: “Oh, take us over to Grafton and show us your house,” but that seemed very forward. Chan spoke up.

“Let us go over to the picnic grounds, where they take the Sunday-school. There's a great flat rock that makes a table, and some other rocks and a waterfall——”

“Only in rainy times,” interposed Prim.

“Well, there's swings of wild grapevines, and I guess there's some ripe grapes, and it's pretty and woodsy.”

“I don't believe I've seen it. Is it anywhere near Boyce's pond?”

“It's 'way down under it. That's where the waterfall gets its water from. And you go through the road over to the woods where they cut trees in the winter, instead of going uphill.”

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"I've wondered where that road led to. Yes, we'll go there."

He turned Bonnie around, and they shouted out "good-by" as if they were starting for the north pole. They were rather quiet at first, but the twins began a merry chatter and suddenly Laurel said:

"Oh, I did ought to have b'ought Dolly. She'll be 'onesome and cwy."

"You know her cheek was so bruised," and Marigold smiled. "Rilla 'll take good care of her."

Then Laurel detailed how Dolly had fallen and bruised her cheek. "An' she was so nice and white before. Rilla made her all over. An' she's dot turly hair an' bu eyes."

Soon they all began to talk. It was a pleasant drive, and Chan pointed out where the road turned off from that going up the hill, which was a ridge of the mountain some miles off.

CHAPTER VI

A PICNIC FOR BOTH PARTIES

"COME now, Rilla, we'll get ready and go," said Mrs. Firth. "I'll take some stockings and Linn's coat and trousers so he will look a little decent. He'd rather walk down there barefoot. He said the shoes hurt him cruelly on Sunday."

Mrs. Briggs and her mother were as much interested in the five dollars as if it had been a hundred.

"Though I do say," commented Aunt Patty, "that farm ought to have been sold and you all had a slice. 'Tain't fair to leave everything to the men folks. An' it seems to me there ought to have been more spoons and such. You wasn't there, so you really can't tell how much there was. An' is the old truck good for anything? The idea of any one's wanting to buy an old high-post bedstead! Jane, you better try and sell your two up garret."

"I'd just like to," returned Mrs. Briggs.

Linn washed and "smarted up" a little while

his mother was going over the things she could recall. Then they started for the store. Ready-made shoes had come quite into favor, though it was admitted they didn't wear as well, neither did they cost as much.

Linn put on his stockings and took good care that the shoes were plenty big enough. Then Mrs. Firth went over to the drygoods counter.

"Now, Rilla," she began, "we'll look over these gingham and see if we can find a pretty one. You've been such a good, steady girl."

"Oh, mother!" Rilla's eyes shone with delight.

The new goods were very pretty. Not the block pattern merely, but broken lines and colors interwoven in a really artistic manner. They mightn't stand washing as well, but they certainly were very tempting. Amaryllis hardly knew which to choose, but Linn helped, and they went home two delighted children.

Of course Rilla could not help thinking about the ride, but she was so glad to have Mr. Mann come back to them that she did not feel a bit jealous. And he didn't despise them because they were poor and lived in a little old house, neither did he think the twins were two too many, as she had sometimes. She never would again. She

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would believe with mother that God would take care of them all. Why, He *was* taking care of them. Mrs. Bayles's two children had been sick nearly all last winter with scarlet fever, and the minister's little girl had bronchitis, and for a fortnight could not speak loud. Yes, God *did* take care of them.

And they were having a splendid, gay time with the ride. But by and by Rhoda said, "Lal," her abbreviation, "you come and sit here and let me stay there by Mr. Mann."

Laurel looked up. "I des tan't," she said decisively.

"Can't she, Goldie? And—and—he lets her drive"—and she slid down from her seat.

Laurel had put her little hand on the reins, and Mr. Mann had only smiled.

Marigold drew Rhoda back, and she began to cry. "Oh, what a naughty girl!" said the elder sister.

"There is room enough for both of them here," rejoined Mr. Mann, holding her with his free hand and guiding her around, "and you shall help drive."

She was all smiles then.

The road was shady, with trees on either side. It was not much more than a wagon road. Pres-

ently, on the north side, it began to grow rocky, rising higher and higher, in some places almost barren, then spaces of shrubbery and even wild flowers. It was quite a picturesque dell. You could see by the moisture at the roadside that at times there might be quite a little rill. It was so shut in that there were only glimpses of the sun.

"Why, I had no idea there was such a pretty spot here," said Mr. Mann smilingly. "So, you see, there are two sides to everything."

"And when there isn't any other side there is an inside," returned Marigold.

"That's so," nodding, much amused.

And now the ledge of rock grew higher and seemed to turn partly round; just here a small stream came tumbling down the sheer descent, and then wound round a tuft of shrubbery to take another fall and find its way to the roadside.

"It's splendid in the spring," said Marigold. "Some of the men let you come up when they are drawing logs in the winter and this is all icicles. You can climb down from the pond side—the boys sometimes do. Linn has. We'd often come out here, but it is too far to walk both ways."

"I should think so."

"Here we are," cried Chan, "and there's the table and some seats."

That was what it looked like. A great spread of flat stone and ridges back of it like a series of steps, but after the first two or three, very jagged. And further on was a great reach of rhododendrons in their pointed branches of next year's buds and glossy leaves.

"Father used to come here," said Marigold. "He brought down all our rhododendrons, and that's what Rhody was named for. I wish he'd called her Flora, and that's near enough flowers and is such a beautiful name. And I'd like to be called Lily. Do you think Marigold a pretty name for a girl? I don't mind Goldie so much."

"You are all a garden of flowers. I don't believe I want any of you changed."

Laurel had fallen asleep.

"You jump out and take her," said Mr. Mann.

"We can get out," said Primrose with a spring. Laurel roused and clutched the strong arm.

"I 'ant to tay wis you," in a very sleepy tone.

"Yes, dear," he said. It seemed so sweet and strange to have a little child in his arms—a baby girl that he used to long for years ago.

They all scrambled out. Chan felt rather stiff, and rubbed his leg. Mr. Mann tied Bonnie, though she was hardly likely to run away, and then lifted out the basket of good things.

"Now, you girls must set the table; Tip, can you go over yonder and get a pail of water?" handing out a small tin pail.

"Oh, isn't it splendid!" Prim danced around. "And such lots of good things!"

"Prim, do behave. You act as if you had never seen anything before. Chan, are you tired?" and Marigold's voice was full of solicitude.

"I'll walk around a bit and get rested. It's just—just——"

"Supersplacious," said Prim, laughing, "and salubrious and salutiferous and salutary. I've been studying the back part of the speller. I mean to train for a spelling match."

"I think you'll do," laughed Mr. Mann in return. "And an inventor of new words."

What an array of tempting things! Cakes with white icing and red icing, cakes with jelly in the middle, nuts in a square of something that looked like white cream, and as for candies, they had never seen the like of half of them. Nuts shelled out, except the paper almonds, dainties enough to upset the ordinary stomach, a man's way of providing a feast. How they laughed and made queer comments and suggestions, and how the goodies disappeared!



"Now, you girls must set the table."—Page 92.

"Now you must run around awhile to shake down all this stuff. I'll keep the twins, and I want Chan. And the rest of the dainties you may take home. Or would you rather go with them, Chan?"

"Well—I think I'll stay with you."

The others started off. They whooped to make echoes, they found some swings, and some grapes, but they were not enjoyable after the sweet things.

"And they're likely to make your tongue sore unless they are dead ripe," Marigold announced. "Oh, we might take some home. They make splendid sauce."

"What are you thinking about, Chan?"

The boy's face was grave, rather sad.

"That it was splendid to have plenty of money. You can make so many people happy," the boy said simply.

And happiness was such a great thing!

"You can do other things as well."

"But you have to use money for them. Why, if you didn't have money you couldn't buy seeds, and then you wouldn't have any garden, and if you hadn't any money to buy flour with, you couldn't have any bread, nor clothes, and I want to be big and well so I can earn some."

"I wish you'd tell me about your hip. What does the doctor say?"

"Well—he didn't know, he told mother. He said it wasn't broken. There's a doctor over to Ridgewood who knows all about such things, but he charges twenty-five dollars to talk to you. Mother thinks she can save it up by and by. But I'm afraid. I don't want to be cut up," and he shivered.

"Perhaps you wouldn't need to be cut up. You want to grow up straight and strong, don't you?" and Mr. Mann's smile was encouraging.

"Maybe I'll outgrow it, the doctor said."

"Do you think you do—any?"

"I want mother to think so. I'm not going to school this winter, it's so far, and makes me so tired, and sometimes I stumble and down I go. You see, it feels as if my leg would drop out, but it never does—it can't, you know. I'm going to study some. Prim she's just great on studying and will tell me lots of things. She comes out and helps me garden and lets mother think I do it all. You don't believe that's real wrong, do you? For when mother says, 'Chan, little boy, how much stronger you are growing,' I don't say anything, so we don't either of us tell any story."

How brave the little fellow was! Adonijah Mann winked his eyes hard as if the dust had blown into them, but the road was largely dried grass.

"Oh, look at those twins!" Chan sprang up and winced a little. "They'll half kill themselves. You see, they're not used to candy and fine things."

He limped over to the children, and pulled them sharply away from the pile of goodies they were to take home.

"You gormandizing little pigs!" he exclaimed. "Don't you know we saved that for momsey? You'll be sick and have such a horrid pain in your stomach, worse than any spanking you ever had!"

Laurel began to cry. Rhoda stood her ground sturdily.

"The man said they were for us. He said, 'eat all you want.'"

"But you mustn't make pigs of yourselves or you'll have to go in a pen. And oh, what faces and sticky hands!"

Chan gathered the remnants and put them into a paper bag. Mr. Mann laughed. Rhoda's face turned very red.

"Now let me wash you a bit." He went over

and dipped his handkerchief in the little runlet, and soon had cleanliness restored. Then there was another wail.

"Oh, that's Tip. If he had gone home without a crying spell I should have thought he was sick. It's queer, but Tip is the best little fellow when he has a cold or sore throat—he saves all his tears for well times."

"Do you suppose he is crying for his mother?" There was a humorous glint in Mr. Mann's eyes. Chan laughed.

"Maybe they won't swing him or maybe he wants to come down and have some more goodies, or he may have scratched his hand or stubbed his toe."

"He can't have any more doodies. They'm for mama," interposed Laurel.

"Oh, you're very considerate now! Let us go and see what the row is about."

There was a thicket fairly overrun with grapevines, growing up in the tall trees, crisscross and every way. Several were natural swings. Mari-gold had fashioned some not very comfortable seats out of hemlock boughs. She and Prim could stand up and swing, but one of them had to sit and hold Tip. That wasn't so much fun for them.

"Want to wide in tree-horsey?" appealed Laurel.

"'Tain't a horse, and you couldn't hold on," interposed Rhoda. "I could. See my hands how big they are!"

"I'll give you a little swing in my lap, only you must hold tight to me. Chan, come and push us," said Marigold.

"The sun has put out his lamp,
The mean and miserable scamp,
And we soon will have to decamp,"

declared Primrose, "only don't let's hurry."

The sun had dropped down the other side of the great hill, and the woods were in a purplish gloom. Mr. Mann consulted his watch.

When Rhoda had taken her turn, Goldie lifted up Laurel. It was an uncomfortable seat, and Laurel wasn't as keen about holding on as her twin. She said presently, "I think we ought to go home."

"One more for me," begged Tip.

"Not another one. Now, Tip, if you cry again you shall never, never go on another picnic with us! And two *nevers* are as much as a hundred years," declared Prim decisively.

"Yes, I think we had better start," said Mr. Mann, going to unfasten Bonnie.

Tip sniveled a little.

"This is a lovely spot," exclaimed Mr. Mann.
"And where does the road lead to?"

"Oh, it's just for hauling logs. It goes a long way up."

Bonnie whinnied as they came near. Her master patted her nose.

"What does she say? Can you tell horse talk?" asked Rhoda.

The master laughed. "She says now she would like to go home and have her supper."

"I don't want any supper. I'm just going straight to my little trundle bed," and Rhoda gave a great yawn.

Chan fed Bonnie some wisps of grass, while Mr. Mann was getting her ready. They put in the basket, sadly depleted now, but then there had been six hungry children indulging in a feast of good things such as do not fall to the lot of country youngsters every day.

"Mr. Mann," began Marigold, "I think Prim and I had better sit on the back seat and hold the twins. They'll be asleep in five minutes."

"But you——" studying the pleasant face.

"Oh, I've held them many a time. I know about sleepy babies."

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There was a smiling light in her merry blue eyes.

So they were packed in. Tip and Chan were delighted above measure to sit on the front seat, though Chan rather envied Tip the privilege of snuggling up to Mr. Mann. The orange and scarlet in the west faded out, and grayish clouds went drifting slowly over the sky. Bonnie trotted along, she knew she was on the homeward road, but when she reached the lane she did not want to turn down.

"You can soon come back again, old girl," said her master.

Mrs. Firth and the two older children were on the doorstep waiting, and there was a cheerful light shining through the window.

Tip was so sound asleep that he dropped down in a little heap. Linn carried him in and tumbled him on the old settee, then ran out again. Mr. Mann was lifting the babies out and depositing them in safe arms.

"We've had just the most splendid time," began Prim, "and we brought home some of it. We played tea on the rock, and we wished you and Rilla were there. We raced and ran and swung and climbed, but we didn't dast to eat many wild grapes, they weren't quite ripe. And we yelled

and hurrahed like wild Indians. There never was anything like it, the Sunday-school picnic couldn't hold a candle to it. And, Mr. Mann, you are the splendor—"

Prim talked straight on, not minding what the others were saying. Mrs. Firth was trying to express her gratitude.

"I don't know but you may have trouble in the night," the host was saying. "You see, I don't understand much about children. I believe plain bread and butter is best for them, but there were sweets of all sorts, and you must pardon me if I've stuffed them with the wrong things. I'll drive over to-morrow and inquire."

"Oh, don't feel alarmed. You were so very good to give them the pleasure. I can't thank you enough. I wish there was something we could do in return. Why, it's almost like the fairy stories the children read aloud sometimes. I do hope they haven't set you quite crazy. You see I'm used to them, having had them by degrees, as one may say, and they are always dear to their mother."

Chan and Prim and Marigold said their good-bys over again and again, and patted Bonnie's neck until she started off. Then they came in and helped undress the twins, who never said a

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word, but Tip cried a little and said, "I want my muver."

"Dear lamb, mother has you safe and sound," and she kissed him many times.

"I just want some plain bread and butter,—rye bread," said Primrose. "I'm sweet all the way through, and I want something to settle it."

They had to examine Linn's new shoes and Rill's dress, which Marigold declared was pretty enough for a party gown and looked almost like Mrs. Provost's silk.

After they were upstairs they talked about Mr. Mann in half-whispers and with burning cheeks.

"It's a shame we said such nasty things about him," confessed Marigold in deepest penitence. "That he was just making fun because we were poor, and that he couldn't care anything about us, and that we knew he never would come, for we were a set of wild Arabs. And he was so sweet to the twins, and never found a word of fault though we carried on like all-possessed. O dear! I don't believe any one ever had a better time, no matter how rich they were!"

"I'm so glad he is coming to-morrow!" returned Amaryllis. "We must all be in our best. And oh, wasn't it lucky the children were all washed and dressed clean!"

“And they looked so horrid that day they were out on the step crying. Oh, if we were only a little richer and mother didn’t have to go out sewing and some good fairy would send us five dollars now and then! Rill, I’m so glad you have that spandy new frock,” and she almost squeezed the breath out of her sister. “Did you ever know such a day in all our lives!”

Amaryllis never did.

Bonnie trotted cheerfully homeward and greeted Dan with a whinny. Mr. Mann, not having stuffed himself, was glad to eat a supper of the most delicious bread and butter and cold chicken. And he interspersed it with little laughs, admitting that he, too, had never had a better time. How bright and queer and funny they all were!

Only it made the house seem lonesomer, and the old owl in the great pine tree kept saying, “To who! to who—who—who!” as if he really were asking a question.

Well, he would like two of them, Chan, and have a doctor straighten out his hip and make his leg strong. He had such a sweet, almost pathetic voice, such a winsome, appealing face. But he could hardly choose between saucy, daring Prim and Marigold. Of course Mrs. Firth would need Amaryllis to help her look after the others, and

if some way he could give them a little income. True, he might make their lives easier, but to have a son growing up like Mr. Bradley down the street, and a sweet, young daughter who would come and twine her arms about his neck, and—yes—kiss him. He was hungry for real, demonstrative love, something that had never been in his life. And why shouldn't he spend his money for it? He didn't want any finer house, he would keep another horse, and the boy should learn to ride. Maybe the girl would like a piano. Yes, he was fond of music and he had thought of one of those new-fangled things that almost played itself when you put in the music. Would it be silly for a sort of common, middle-aged man to have one?

What a delightful home it would make! There might be twenty or thirty years, and it would compensate for that narrow, arid beginning. There was something more inspiring than laying up treasures for one's self, it was asking a neighbor to come in and share, and if the neighbor were a little child there would be years when one could do and plan. Last year he had given the children at an asylum a treat, and watched their delighted faces. Even then he had wished for one. This Christmas was not so far off—four months hardly.

What if two little children came and sat by his fireside? They should hang up their stockings of course. There should be an old-fashioned Santa Claus and he would believe in it with them.

CHAPTER VII

MR. MANN'S VISIT

THE children, with the exception of the twins, had gone to Sunday-school. They, in plain white frocks, had their little chairs out of doors, and were visiting each other as they often did. Laurel had her doll, whose cheek had somewhat recovered from its bruise. Rhoda had a picture book, made of cloth, and pictures painted in it, and they were discoursing upon a marvelous journey they had made. Mrs. Firth sat by the window reading, the only time she found for such an indulgence.

She had accepted life with a cheerfulness that had made the wheels of labor revolve more easily than a feeling of protest would have done. She had loved her husband sincerely. He was a man out of place, he had a mental equipment for a much higher sphere. Yet this sweet, pretty school teacher had such a decided preference for him—he was so superior in refinement to the country lads of Denby, and they had many tastes in common. Of course Bessy had to stay and care for her grandmother, and then David Firth found

himself tied, even if the fast coming babies had not strengthened the chain. She was not the high order of woman that modern education pretends to make, but she did her duty as she saw it in a praiseworthy manner.

People began to advise now that she should do something with Amaryllis. Some of the neighbors would have taken her for a dollar a week, but Mrs. Firth dreaded to break up her household. For this year at least she would go on. She saw her way quite clear for the winter, and if she went out sewing Amaryllis was surely needed at home.

The next sorrow to the loss of her husband was Chandler's accident. For a while he seemed to improve, but her heart ached now with the certainty that he was slipping back. Dr. Breen frankly admitted that he was not up in the new methods. He could set a broken limb, but this plainly was not broken. They had used liniments, but the rubbing he recommended hurt the little lad, and his mother's heart was tender.

She rose when she saw Bonnie and her driver, and came out to greet her visitor with an old-fashioned sort of courtesy, and said she was glad to see him, and she hoped he was none the worse for his kindness of yesterday.

"No, indeed. I never had a better time. I begin to think I should have been the father of a family, but we never happened to have any, and my wife didn't seem to care for children or I might have adopted some. A man misses them when he comes to middle life. They are such an interest."

"Oh, they are, they are! Why, without them a woman wouldn't be much better than an old maid."

"And the twins had no upset in the night? I was rather afraid——"

"They thrashed about a good deal but slept without a whimper, and sometimes one or the other does cry in the night. No, they were none the worse, though they don't often get such a feast," laughing pleasantly. "They never had anything like it. It was very good of you."

She raised her pretty, soft brown eyes. There was a touch of pink in her cheeks. Her black and white cambric dress was neat, and seemed to set her off much more than the dingy black.

"I suppose I may tie my horse to the tree, though Bonnie is good at standing. I'm glad to find you alone—I came for a little talk."

"Yes. Then please to walk in. We're not very grand. This was grandmother's old house.

My parents died when I was a little girl, and she always took care of me. She was as good as gold, and she left the house to me and the children. There really wasn't any one else, you see," and the sweet smile overspread her face. "When husband was alive he kept it up in good order, patching and painting. It makes a great difference when the man has gone."

"Yes, it must, it must." But the room was clean and neat, there were some really good pictures, and a bowl of flowers stood on a little stand, while the settee was covered with a red and black shawl of Aunt Hitty's; they had found use for one article, and it really renewed its youth. At the lower end was the dining-table with some of the chairs around it. The mantel had two curious vases that were really antiques, a pair of tall, brass candlesticks, snuffers and tray that shone like gold, and a pitcher in very much ornamented lusterware.

He came in and sat down after he had spoken to the twins. He was such a straightforward fellow that he plunged into the business at once.

"I want to hear about your little boy," he said, "the one called Chan."

"Yes. His name is Chandler. It was grandmother's name, and she was dead then. Is it—

about his hip? He was such a nice, spry little fellow before that happened. And I'm afraid it's growing worse."

"Tell me what you have done?"

It was a very simple story. Everybody had been kind and sympathetic. There was a doctor at Ridgewood Dr. Breen wanted her to see, and she went over there, but he asked twenty-five dollars to make an examination, and she said, with a blush, she had not been able to save it up yet.

"They do such wonderful things in hospitals nowadays——"

"Oh, I couldn't think of his going to a hospital!" she interrupted. "And all alone? Oh, he wouldn't, I'm sure!"

She had the inexperienced terror of a hospital, he saw that, so he must go slowly. He had been used to managing and advising men, but women *were* different. Mrs. Ross he considered sensible and reasonable. The woman he knew best had been quietly obstinate, and found many ingenious ways to thwart him. Earning and saving were her cardinal principles. He had come to like Mrs. Alden very much.

He felt now he must give up his ideas in part and go slowly, take a new tack. He had considerable adaptiveness.

“Oh, the cities couldn’t do without hospitals,” he said in a cordially approving tone. “People live in such crowds that there is no room to take care of a sick person, and the doctors are learning all the time. They are tenderer, too. They save limbs, they straighten crooked legs and crooked backs, and make sound bodies when they can, instead of having people suffer all their lives.”

There was a sound of voices, and a throng put in its appearance fresh from Sunday-school. A well-looking group, six children with rosy faces, except Chan, who looked quite languid.

Marigold made a spring into the room.

“Oh, Mr. Mann!” and she held out both hands. “I’m so glad you have come! Will you tell mother that we weren’t very bad and troublesome yesterday? She’s so afraid we worried you.”

He laughed heartily. “It would take more than a few youngsters, I think. I told Mrs. Alden about you—she’s my housekeeper and as nice as they make ’em, and she wants to see you. So we’re not frightened. I wonder if some of you won’t come over and make me a visit? I haven’t seen this one but just a moment one day,” and he held out his hand to Linn, who blushed even to

his ears, thinking how he looked the day he had run over from the store. "You've a nice lot of them, ma'am,—Mrs. Firth," in a little confusion. "Don't you think you could spare a few of them now and then to come over and visit me?"

Mrs. Firth blushed under his quick glance. Why, it didn't seem as if she could be mother of this eager group.

Primrose plucked up courage. There were very few things that abashed her.

"I should like to see your house and the—the lady. I s'pose it's as nice as the parsonage. But it seems queer to live all alone. I shouldn't like it."

"I don't like it either," his eyes twinkling.

That nonplussed Prim for the moment. Then she subjoined, "Why do you do it?"

"Primrose!" in a deprecating tone from her mother.

"Well—because I haven't found just the ones I've wanted. I've been looking around among orphan asylums and homes, and a while ago my partner's wife, Mrs. Ross, brought up her two little girls for a visit, and we had a nice time, but there were only two of them, so I couldn't keep one, and if I'd kept both what would their mother have done?"

Tip edged round by his mother and eyed Mr. Mann suspiciously.

"There are so many of you," he said laughingly, and the dimple in his cheek deepened. "Now two of you might come, and when you went home two more. We might begin with Linn here—and——" He glanced around to Chan.

"Oh, I'd like to come," Linn replied eagerly. "But—next week school begins, and I don't want to miss that. And this week Mrs. Briggs bespoke me special. She's going to clean house. The men folks are wanted in the field, and Lida's all crippled up with rheumatism and can't help, only she can sit round and cook. But there's such a sight of things up in the garret to be moved about, and the running up and down. If I could come Saturday when mother didn't want me," looking up questioningly.

"Yes, I'll take you Saturday and Sunday, and send you over Monday morning in time. I might bring Chan over a day or two beforehand. And then two girls. Why, I shall be quite merry. How about that, Primrose? Will you and Mari-gold come?"

"I tum too," and Laurel laid her dolly on Mr. Mann's knee. "I bing Dolly."

"So you shall, little one."

"Who'll take care of her?" asked Rhoda, "She can't dress herself. I can. I'm bigger than Laurel. And I can do a good many things, and I'm learning to read."

"Then that's settled. You two will come and stay a whole week. Marigold and Primrose will come and stay a week to keep me from getting lonesome, and Linn and Amaryllis two nice, long days. We'll take rides all round. And Chan——"

Tip began to feel afraid he was being crowded out, and exclaimed hurriedly, "Why can't I come with Chan?"

"To be sure, that's the way to fix it. How lucky there's eight of you! You'll like my big dog, Pilot, and my little dog, Bitsy, and Dan is fond of little boys."

"Oh, I know Dan Wilson. And he says your house is just fine," said Linn. "And that you have a piano. Mrs. Burnham at the parsonage has one."

"We did have a dog—Rover," interposed Tip in a very melancholy tone.

"And what became of him?"

"It was—well, this way," interposed Mrs. Firth. "They talk of dogs being so faithful and

trusty, but they are not always. We'd had Rover a good while, he was given to Tip, and all the children loved him. Now and then I'd find some chickens killed, and I blamed some of the other dogs about, or cats, or a skunk, as we have occasionally, but in the spring one morning I saw him thrashing something about, and when I went out I found two of my nice chickens dead, and Rover ran off to the woods and slunk back at night looking very much ashamed, but that didn't bring the chickens back to life. Then the peddler came along and I gave Rover to him and told him he wasn't a trusty dog and that I shouldn't ask what became of him. You know we couldn't keep him, and the Briggs's complained of their chickens being killed, so it wasn't neighborly when I found what it was. And somehow I've not trusted dogs since."

"But I loved Rover very much," said Tip on a half cry.

"Yes, dear, but we couldn't keep him."

She snuggled up her little boy in a tender manner.

"Dogs have that trick sometimes, and they are not worth keeping. Dan would soon learn if ours did anything on the wrong tack. The collie is a fine, affectionate fellow, and Bitsy has

lots of tricks. The children who were there trained him."

"You're very kind to offer so much to the children," said Mrs. Firth in a soft, deprecating tone. "I don't quite know that I ought to take it——"

"Yes, yes. They've no uncles nor aunts it seems, and why shouldn't they have some nice times—that is if they would like it, and not get homesick. Mrs. Alden wants to see them. We're rather lonesome. It will be a great pleasure to us."

"I wouldn't get homesick," declared Prim with eager decision.

"You're the girl for me," giving her hand a squeeze. "But if any of you did, you know Dan could bring you home. Chan, will you be my first guest? On second thoughts I believe I will take four of you for a day, then if you like me well enough to come for a longer visit we will have that."

Marigold's uplifted eyes almost said she liked him well enough, but irrepressible Prim asked, "Which four?"

"You and Marigold and Chan and Tip. Has he any other name?"

Mrs. Firth blushed. "You see it was this way.

Mr. Firth's grandfather was killed in a great battle of Tippecanoe in the Indian war when General Harrison gained such a victory. Then his father voted for the General when he was elected President. And husband used to sing an old bit of song—

“ ‘Tippecanoe and Tyler, too,
Are bound to rule the country through,’ ”

and he was named Harrison, but his father began by calling him Tip, and sometimes giving him the whole name, and I've never had the heart to change it.”

“ So you've had a hero in the family,” he said with admiration.

“ Oh, husband was in the Civil War. He was considerably older than I, but we were very happy. You see, he had picked up a good deal of knowledge, and he could interest you so. But his heart was all set on flowers and trees, and we used to plan that sometime we'd go away from Denby, only here was the house, and we couldn't seem to get ahead. He did a good deal of work over in Grafton. You know farmer-folk are not much for anything besides hay, corn, and potatoes,” with a vague little smile. “ We had some fine fruit trees—maybe you would like to see them? ”

She rose and he followed, Laurel holding one hand and Prim the other. A path led straight down. On one side were the chicken houses and runs that had been patched and patched upon again with much ingenuity. On the other side the vegetable garden. All the lower part was in an orchard. There were some fine quince trees loaded with fruit, thrifty apples and pears, but the peaches were showing signs of having outlived their most productive days.

"You see, I don't just know how to take care of them, but they've brought us in quite a bit of money in the fall. Only, some of them are going now," and she sighed.

That was true enough, and the old house was going, too. What would she do by and by?

"Mrs. Firth, I want to talk to you about the little lad." The children had espied some fallen pears and peaches, and had run to gather them, so they had no one but the twins. There had been various plans in his mind, but he was a straightforward sort of man, and now he was going to fasten on this one. "Yes, the little lad and his lameness. He's a plucky little chap, and ought to be helped, as I am quite sure he can be. There's a kind of children's home in New York where they take in poor little ones and mend them

up, only sometimes they get past mending." He would not say "hospital" lest it might jar on her fears as well as her feelings. "I went in the last day I was in the city, and saw one of the doctors, a nice, kindly, youngish man, and told him what I knew about the case, or guessed at, and he's anxious to see Chan. You can do so much for children while their bones and ligatures are kind of soft, though in other places they almost work miracles for grown-ups, and I'd like to take him down and just see what can be done."

"But, you see——" The tears came into her eyes and made them lustrous. "Oh, I think rich people can't understand, when they can do things so easy, how hard it is for poor people to get a little money together. I hoped to go over to Ridgewood and see that doctor this fall——"

"See here, madam, I'm not rich, but the good Lord seems to have prospered me, and given me a friend when I was in sore need. I've been worse off than yours, though I was a strong, hearty little lad. I've known what it was to be hungry. I've crept into a drygoods box and slept, so I know all about the pinches, and it would be a poor story if I couldn't do something in return. That's the small change of kindness that ought to go round

the world. And I was thinking—let the children come over and have a good time—say on Wednesday—and Chan stay all night. The next day I have to go to the city, and I could take him and find what's wrong and how it can be helped, and then you would know. As for the money to do it—why, some day they may start a pretty town over here and take in that beautiful tract up by the pond as they did Grafton, and your place might bring in quite a little fortune. Or when Chan's grown up straight and strong and making money he could pay it back if it would make you feel better about it. Why, you needn't worry a mite. I've no one to spend money on unless I pick up waifs and strays, and I'll take it as a favor if you'll let me help a little."

She was crying then, and held her handkerchief up to her face. More than once she had fancied she would borrow the money, but somehow she never had the courage.

"If you would—if we ever could—pay you back again——" in tremulous tones.

"Why, in a little while Linn will be grown up and I could put him in the way of business. You'll have a smart family of them; don't you ever feel afraid. Only Chan wants an equal chance with the rest and not be handicapped in

life's race. So now wouldn't it be good to know just what could be done?"

"You are so kind——"

"We'll settle it that way."

"If Chan will stay all night. He's grown sort of strange and afraid of late."

"Oh, Mr. Mann, did you ever see two more splendid peaches than these? I picked them for you," and Prim had her dress skirt under her arm and a peach in each hand. They were beauties, too.

"Oh, Prim, look at your skirt, your clean, white frock, too!"

For Primrose had made a sort of bag of the front by gathering it up in a bunch, and now it was full of fruit. Rilla had gone back for a basket. Marigold held up a big, luscious pear.

"I never saw anything finer," said Mr. Mann. "Now you shall each give me one."

"I've given you two and I'm not going to take one back," exclaimed Prim decisively.

"No, indeed."

"Let us go back to the house," said the mother.

She was in a curious tumult of feeling. True—sometime they might pay back the money indebtedness, though she had no idea of the real cost;

then Chan's little limp smote her heart. Yes—she must consent and trust Providence.

Amaryllis had been hunting about and found a fine bunch of grapes that had lived in the sunshine and colored deliciously.

“Oh, Rill, where did you find them? I'll brag of that over at the Briggs's. Theirs are just turning,” said Linn.

“I've been watching them for a week. I was awful 'fraid the birds would pick them. The vine runs over that little cedar tree.”

She held the bunch up to Mr. Mann.

“Ours are just turning, too. Thank you, my dear. I don't forget you were my first friend, and some day we'll have another nice drive together.”

She flushed deeply. She was so sorry she and Marigold had said “mean” things about him when they thought he had been “just funning.”

It was settled presently. Four of the children would come over and spend the day, and Chan would stay all night and go to the city the next morning. They all hovered about him like bees, though their mother in her pretty, helpless way kept checking them. And the man who had longed for children of his very own began to feel almost as though the joy was his.

CHAPTER VIII

THE TIME OF THEIR LIVES

“REMEMBER, Dan, the whole four, two boys and two girls. Don't you dare to come back with one missing,” was Mr. Mann's decree.

“Though I don't just know how you will stand it,” he said to Mrs. Alden. “They're not a bad lot, and that Tip is a funny little fellow who cries where the others laugh. Prim is—well, she should have been a boy, but they're all so kind of tender and loving, and when they scold it's very amusing. I don't believe their mother knows how. Amaryllis is the second mother, and she's such a smart little thing.”

“Oh, we'll get along. I'll have a good hearty dinner and peach dumpling with sauce. I hope they won't make too much noise for the neighbors. Do you know, I feel sorry for that little girl of the Chedisters'. She sits there day after day or rides her doll up and down the lawn path and is always beruffled and tied up with ribbons, and wears a necklace, and looks so wistful like.”

“Marigold has a curly red mop—it’s pretty, too. Prim has big, dark eyes, and a tail of light, yellowish hair. I don’t know that they are pretty—yes,” considering, “but not handsome. Tip is like a little weasel. Chan is—well, the sort of child that goes to your heart. Maybe it’s his lameness.”

“Oh, Mr. Mann, you’re so good to take it in hand.”

“We can stand them for a day,” he said jocosely.

Dan had them all. Catch one of them staying behind! Even the twins had cried to come. Amaryllis had scoured them until they were painfully clean. Marigold’s hair fairly shone—it was a beautiful dark red. Prim’s braid was smooth and tight and tied with a well-washed blue ribbon. They had on their white dresses which were very plain, and had brought along checked aprons to play in. Tip had a blue seersucker blouse and trousers, and Chan a pretty cambric blouse made out of an outgrown frock of Katy Burnham’s. They certainly were a well-looking group as they marched up the porch steps on their very best behavior and made the formal greeting Amaryllis had impressed upon them.

But the company manners did not last long.

There were two fine hammocks on the wide porch. And then Bitsy came running up ready for a frolic. He could do so many things, walk around on his hind legs, beg, be a dead dog, cry as if he were a baby, jump over a chair, and run around after his feathery tail like a cat.

Then Pilot came in for his share. The dogs were so glad to have some children again. And Prim forgot, and raced round the lawn with him to the delight of Gladys Chedister.

And then Mr. Peacock came around with his beautiful tail feathers spread out, but after a glance at the children, or it might have been their shrieks of delight, he dropped suddenly and trotted off in a clumsy fashion.

"Oh, I never saw a peacock before!" cried Prim. "Can't you make him unfold again? Can't we go down that way?"

"Yes, but I wouldn't just now. He's a touchy sort of fellow, not at all amiable, like Bitsy, and when you don't pay much attention to him he's apt to come round."

"And he's very handsome. What was that little thing with him?"

"That little gray-green brown thing? That's his wife—a peahen."

"Well, if that ain't funny. What did he choose

such a little wife for?" asked Prim. "I'd had a beautiful big one like myself. And have they any children?"

"No," rather slowly.

"What are they good for?"

"Just to look handsome, I think."

"Well, I'd rather have a dog," said Tip.

"Do they cost a good deal?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Oh, Prim," exclaimed Marigold, "there are some feathers with that beautiful eye in them at Mrs. Wiley's over her looking-glass. I do wonder if sometime she had a peacock!"

"A peacock has ugly legs," said Chan. "When he spreads his tail and goes strutting around he catches sight of them and down goes his tail at once."

"Then I wouldn't look at my legs," subjoined Tip. "Would you like to be a peacock, Prim?"

"No, I wouldn't. I'd rather be a girl than *anything* else."

"Not even a boy?" asked their host mischievously.

"Mother says she should have been a boy," commented Chan.

"I don't see why!" began Primrose rather affronted. "I can do most things that boys can,

run races and climb trees and slide down hill, and snowball, and then I can do the things that girls do, and what I don't know I can learn. And I can spell down some of the big children. That's the greatest fun in school, only teacher won't let us do it but just on Fridays. I hate writing the words on the slates, and the pencils sometimes squeak so, and the point always breaks off your lead pencil. I don't call that downright spelling at all."

"But you wouldn't want to hoe corn or dig potatoes as the women in Germany do," interposed Chan.

"Or be yoked to a milk cart as the wives sometimes are," said Marigold.

"I sha'n't go and live in Germany. And I mean to be rich when I'm a grown-up woman. I'll marry a Prince like Cinderella did. Now I'm going to have all the fun I can," emphasizing it with a decisive nod.

"A good resolution, Miss Primrose," said her host, very much amused.

"You see, Primrose can put in about twice as much fun as any one else," explained Chan. "But you'd have to get your feet bound if you were going to try for the glass slipper—it would be so small."

"The Prince won't come along just yet," she returned dryly.

"You'll have to be handsome," suggested Tip.

" 'You never can tell what any one will grow up to,' Granny Keen's always saying. 'All the pretty girls turn out homely, so why shouldn't the homely girls grow pretty?' Well, I don't much care. It's fun to wait just to see how things do happen. But don't you wish we had a hammock, Chan? They're just splendid! "

She and Marigold were in one, the boys in the other. Chan luxuriated in the slow, delightful movement.

"Why, we've almost made them in the woods with grapevines, only not as nice as these."

Pilot was tugging at Prim's skirt and looking at her with great, beseeching eyes.

"He wants another race," said his master.

Prim was out of the hammock in a trice and nearly spilled Marigold.

"You splendid old Pilot! What a shame you can't talk words! Yes, we'll have a race," and she was off. Mr. Mann watched her. She ran like a flash and went round the curves with really beautiful precision. Pilot lost time looking back, afraid she wasn't quite in earnest, so they both

came in together, or else he was too mannerly to distance a girl.

“Once again.”

This time Pilot did beat. But Primrose only gave him a most delightful hug and said naïvely, “If I lived here, Pilot, we’d run races every day.” Then she sat down on the step and fanned herself with her dress skirt.

Mrs. Alden came through the hall. “Are you not ’most starved, children?” she asked. “Dinner is ready.”

There was quite a large, square hall where they had deposited their hats and a bundle.

“Oh, we must put on our aprons,” said Mari-gold. “Prim, your frock is dirty already.”

“Yes, Granny Keen says if dirt sticks to you money will stick to you, too. Think how rich I’ll be some day.”

There was a little sort of anteroom that shut off the dining-room when one desired. That was a spacious and really beautiful apartment with a handsome buffet, a fine mantel with a great deer’s head and antlers over the top. The eyes looked fairly human. A china closet with very little china in it. Mrs. Ross advised him not to be in a hurry to fill it up, for she felt almost certain there would be a wife here some day who might

like to arrange things. The Gedneys had been glad to dispose of many of the large articles.

"Oh, I do think my hands ought to be washed!" cried Prim in dismay. "I'm not quite ready to begin collecting gold."

"Come in here," said Mrs. Alden.

To think of washing one's hands in a white marble basin! Prim had a feeling she had dropped into fairyland. And to wipe them on such a soft, lovely towel with a blue border across the ends. A pretty little room, too, with a looking-glass, and a rug on the floor. Oh, if they *only* had something nice.

As for the dinner, that was a feast. Prim put on her very best airs and graces, and used her silver fork as if she had been brought up with such appointments. Marigold watched her out of the corner of her eye, and the rest of the time she devoted to Tip, who had half a mind to cry when he made a blunder. But they certainly did very well.

Then they went out in the yard and garden and inspected the dove-cote and the flock of guineahens, and Mr. Peacock once more spread out his gorgeous plumage. Then there was a pen of splendid white turkeys. Back of all was a strip of woods. Dan was much interested explaining

everything. Prim declared this would make a splendid place to have a picnic.

When they returned to the house Mrs. Alden had opened the parlors, although the farther back one had one side shelved for a library, but it wasn't quarter filled with books, although Mr. Mann brought home a parcel now and then, and wished there was some one to direct him and read to him and discuss things. Marigold said to her mother afterward that the rooms looked so skimpy and so sort of plain that she didn't feel at all out of place, though they were so large.

"Can't any one play on the piano?" she inquired.

"Mrs. Alden does a little—old-fashioned hymn tunes. We ought to have some one who knew songs. Don't you children sing?"

"Chan and Marigold sing just beautiful," declared Prim eagerly.

"And you?" inquired Mr. Mann.

"Oh, I sing like a tea-kettle, mother says, just up and down," making a little motion with her hand like beating time. "Maybe I'll learn by and by," hopefully.

Mrs. Alden came in, fresh and nice in a light cambric gown. They talked of the Sunday-school hymns. She could play some of them.

"Then sing them," suggested Mr. Mann.

They were rather bashful at first, but soon Chan was really inspired by the music. What a beautiful voice the boy had! And Marigold as well. He had heard of little boys in the city who were paid for singing, and men who made a great deal of money. Why, the lad might be able to do something with his voice presently. And though he was pale and thin, what beautiful brown eyes he had, like his mother's.

"There's something mother sings," Chan said presently, "about Bonnie Doon. I know all the words of that."

"Oh, do you?" Mrs. Alden smiled. "It's a great favorite of mine. And 'Auld Lang Syne.'"

"Yes, we know that," said Marigold.

"Then let's have a little chorus."

They sang it very well indeed for new acquaintances. But Mr. Mann thought the boy's voice in "Bonnie Doon" was sweet to heart-breaking. He winked some moisture back in his eyes, and said, "If you don't know anything else, sing them all over again."

He was settling his mind to the plan that he would have Chan and Marigold, and educate them and take pleasure in their growing up here. Even if Chan didn't get quite well he would be a son

worth having, and Marigold had some very pretty ways. They would both come to love him—that was what he wanted. It was better than beginning with babies who couldn't learn much for several years. They were just right.

"Oh, I must go and get supper," Mrs. Alden said as she rose.

"Won't you let me help you a little?" asked Marigold with a winsome smile.

Tip and Prim went out to have a play with the dogs. Chan sat down at the piano and touched the keys lightly with his small fingers.

"Oh, how lovely it must be to make music for yourself," and he gave a rapturous sigh. "It just fills you up to the brim with joy. There isn't anything like it, only sometimes when the pain has been bad mother holds me and sings in her soft way. Did your mother ever do it?"

"I never had a mother to remember."

"Oh, Mr. Mann, I'm awful sorry," Chan put out his left hand, the right was touching the notes softly like the trickling of a rivulet, "'cause a mother's the sweetest and dearest thing in the whole world. Well," reflectively, "my mother is. I don't know as I'd want some other boy's mother."

"The beautifullest mother," Tip had said.

"Children, come to supper," said Mrs. Alden.

Tip and Primrose had to be washed again, and Prim's dress was much soiled as she had shed her apron.

"Oh, isn't it all beautiful!" sighed Tip. "I'd like to live here. And we have only an old tin wash basin, and nothing is nice and new——"

"Oh, hush!" in a whisper. "We have mother, you know, and when we get big we'll earn lots of money and buy them all. We mustn't covet other people's things."

Supper was delightful. Then Dan came round with the surrey, and there were no end of regretful exclamations about the day's being so short.

"And, Mrs. Alden, we've had just the loveliest time, and we're very much obliged to you." Mrs. Firth had told Marigold several times to be sure to say this. "I hope we haven't made you a great deal of trouble, getting dinner for so many. It was just a splendid dinner, and the pudding was 'licious. And the real cake for supper. Mother can't afford icing, she only makes cookies and gingerbread, and they don't need it. There are so many of us to feed."

"I'm glad you liked everything," and Mrs. Alden smiled down into the flushing face. Marigold felt that she had acquitted herself finely. "And you must come again."

So the two girls were helped in.

"I'm not going home," announced Tip. "I'm going to stay all night with Chan."

"Tip!" exclaimed the elders in a breath of wild surprise.

"Yes. Mayn't I?" catching Mr. Mann's hand in an appealing grasp.

"Oh, Tip! What would mother say?"

"Dan can tell her. Why, she'll be glad to have me stay with Chan in a strange place."

"Why, I'm not afraid," remonstrated Chan.

Tip stood up very straight, stretching every point to add dignity to his protestation.

"I'm going to stay. You'll let me?" to Mr. Mann, who was much amused at the little fellow's persistency.

"Tip, come this minute," commanded Primrose.

Instead the child took a step back, still hanging to his host.

"Oh, let him stay," said Mr. Mann. "Dan will take him home in the morning."

"There!" triumphantly.

"Tip, you'll be homesick and cry before bedtime," said Chandler.

"No, I won't, either."

"Make believe to go," said Marigold to Dan, who started Bonnie.

Tip turned with superb dignity, and seated himself on the step. Pilot came and gave him an approval.

“ Good-by, good-by, we’re on our way,
We’ll be glad to come another day,”

sang out Primrose.

Mr. Mann laughed. Chan looked rather cross, if so sweet a face could put on such an expression. The host sat down between the boys. Tip caught his hand again, and smiled. He placed his other arm around Chandler and drew him nearer.

“ I don’t know what mother’ll say——”

“ Oh, I’ll make it all right with your mother,” said Mr. Mann.

“ You think because you’re bigger’n me you’re the biggest toad in the puddle, but you ain’t. Linn’s bigger’n you. And I’m goin’ to school this winter,” Tip said resentfully.

“ You won’t like it a bit. You’ll have to study awful lessons, and you’ll get demerits.”

“ Well, they don’t lick the boys any more. Linn said so.”

“ Oh,” and Chan gave a sudden cry of delight. “ Hear that beautiful bird! Why, it’s ’most like the fine notes on the piano,” and he forgot to quarrel in his rapture.

“ That’s a thrush—wood-robin, some people call

it. They have some nests over there in the woods."

"I wish I knew all the names of birds. There's the bluejay and the martin and the swallow, you can always tell him by the beautiful way he flies, and the robins are as tame as anything. They come and eat up the chickens' feed. And there's a fire-bird that's just gorgeous."

"I must get you a nice book of birds with colored plates."

"Mr. Mann," with a little tremor in his voice, "mother's afraid you'll do too much for us. 'Tisn't as if you were our uncle, or some relation,—we haven't any uncles."

"And I have no nephews or any relations that I know of. I'd like to have some. About two little boys and two girls. That would be just nice. So I think I'll have to be your uncle."

Pilot had been coaxing Tip for a race by all the arts he knew, and when the boy jumped up he was wild in a minute. Down the path he went, even out in the street, as there were no fences.

Mr. and Mrs. Chedister sat on their porch.

"Didn't we understand," she began rather sharply, "that that next-door person was to have no children——"

"That he had none," corrected her husband.
"But he might marry again."

"And there has been the wildest crew there to-day! They have run and raced and shouted and made bedlam so you could hear it plainly over here. They were poorly dressed, too, part of the time had on aprons. Oh, I do hope they don't belong to him! It's a fad now to bring children out of the slums of the city, and I think it very reprehensible. They may scatter disease and bad language, and Heaven only knows what all. This has been such a select neighborhood. And the Gedney children were packed off to boarding-school and to the seaside in vacation, so they really were not a great annoyance."

"I'll find out by Dan," replied Mr. Chedister.

Gladys lived by rule. She had gone to bed now, but she lay there wide awake thinking of the merry time the children had, and wishing there were some real children to play with her. She did get so tired sitting still or just walking up and down or playing with Helen Augusta, who was quite a cultivated doll who could say "mama" and walk when you wound her up, after the fashion of moving wax figures. But after one had had Helen Augusta for a year, and played tea with her and dressed and undressed her, she

began to pall. Sometimes when she was down in the field and Joanna was reading, she actually took a little run. But to run with a real live girl, and scream if you wanted to!

"Yes, you'll have to call me uncle," Mr. Mann was saying after some consideration. "I don't think I have a very pretty name to call," and he gave his little chuckle.

"What! All of us? The whole eight?"

Then he laughed merrily. "That would be funny. You and Tip might begin."

"Well—if mother was willing. Yes, I'd like it." How good and strong the arm about him felt. "But if I couldn't get well, would you like a lame little boy?"

"I ought to care more for him. But you're going to get well. We'll see to-morrow."

"Will it hurt much?"

"It won't hurt at all. They have a curious light they call an x-ray and that looks at you, looks through you and sees just what is the matter. They don't have to cut into anybody, but if they did the doctor would give him ether, and that's just like going to sleep, and when he wakes he is all mended up right and all he has to do is to get well."

"That seems very easy," returned Chan. "But

Granny Keen said once I might have to lose my leg. Oh, I couldn't do that!" with a pathetic little cry. "There's old Mr. Downs by the store who has a sort of wooden leg and goes stumping round, and Alf Gardiner goes on crutches cause his leg is all twisted up with rheumatism. And Polly Stead has one such short leg because her hip was hurt."

"Never you mind what the old grannies say, my little lad. We'll have this all right as you will see, and you must not be afraid of anything bad happening. God takes care of little boys."

Did He always? Mr. Mann thought of the maimed little creatures he had seen in the city.

Tip came back warm and tired, and crawled up close to the sheltering arm, but presently laid his little face down on the soft knee, and shut his eyes.

"Tell me about your other brother—Linn," Mr. Mann said. "I don't seem to know much about him."

"Oh, Linn's splendid and strong, and can run like a wild horse. He's going to school again this winter 'cause mother has so much work now she can spare him, and then farmers don't have so much for boys in the winter, though Mrs. Briggs would keep him all the time, he's so handy to have

about, but he's so fond of books and study, and is going to do something to make a good deal of money. Then we're all going away. Mother thinks the old house will fall down by that time," laughing a little. "Some of the chimney blew off last spring."

"And Amaryllis——"

"She can't go to school, you see. She's got to stay home and be mother while real mother is out working. And Rilla knows lots of things, and she's so good and sweet when any of us has earache or toothache or a bad pain. Oh, we just couldn't get along without her."

He was so interested in hearing about their straits and economies. He had been there himself.

CHAPTER IX

IN A HOSPITAL WARD

"MR. MANN, don't you think it is time those children went to bed?" said the low, motherly voice of Mrs. Alden.

"O my! Why, I forgot about bedtime! It is so delightful out here, and my little lad has been so entertaining. He's going to be my boy for good and all, ain't you, Chan? And Tip's sound asleep."

"Now you'll have a time," exclaimed Chan fearfully, "if he begins to cry for mother! He often lies around and goes to sleep, and she picks him up and undresses him without a word."

"Maybe I could. I've done it to little boys before now. If you could carry him upstairs——"

Mr. Mann took him in his arms very gently. Pilot gave a little whine, but he was hushed at once. Tip was laid on the bed, and Mrs. Alden took his clothes off one side, then the other, and the shoes and stockings. He gave a little grunt or two, and she laid him on one side of the bed, looking up smilingly.

"You're just like a mother," said Chan.

"I had two little boys once."

"Where are they now?"

"Oh, they're grown-up men. Can I do anything for you?"

"Thank you," returned Chan. "I'm used to waiting upon myself."

"Here is a glass of water on the window-sill."

He gave a grateful nod.

Oh, what a lovely big room it was, with a pretty paper, roses and daisies and long grass stems, and white window draperies, and a white spread on the bed, and a soft carpet that looked like brown moss with green leaves scattered about; a bureau with a great glass, a stand with a bowl and ewer, and towels with red borders across the ends. And the bed was what Prim would have called "supersplacious."

Mr. Mann went to his room and sat down by the window. The moon was crawling up in the heavens, but the stars seemed to defy her. Oh, how fragrant the air was with the falling dew! And what a day it had been! How Chan had crept into his heart! He could still feel the clasp of the little fingers, hear the sweet voice that was full of music in singing. Yes, he would take

the child, and he should be like his very own. He never would know the difference, for Chan was so little when his father died, how could he remember? And he could do so much more for him than his own father.

And Tip? Well, the other must be a girl. Should it be Prim or Marigold? Prim was so bright and droll. Marigold would be very pretty with her curling hair, her eyes full of laughing lights, then gravely sweet like a shaded lake, and her mouth was so merry and daring and sweet and perplexing. He couldn't very well have Amaryl-lis, her mother would need her, and the twins were too small. Yes, it must be Marigold.

He actually fell asleep there in the reclining chair, not for the first time either. He did so enjoy this liberty with no one to keep nagging at him.

Sometimes there was a cry or a shriek. The old owl in the sycamore was uttering his wail, and he turned over, surprised to find himself not in bed. Oh, the children! What had happened?

This had happened.

Unluckily Tip had wakened. In the narrow bed at home he could always feel Linn. He stretched out his hand—there was nothing. He sat up—the moon was shining in the window.

There was something on the floor, he saw it move. Then he uttered a shriek.

"Tip! Tip!" Chan had hold of him. "Hush up, I'm here. You're——" he placed his hand over Tip's mouth, but it was jerked away.

"I want my muver! I want my muver! There's a big black bear on the floor, and oh, just hear it!"

"You silly 'ramus! That's an owl, and there's no bear. Hush up or I'll stick you under the bed. I said you oughtn't stay. And you are making such a racket you'll wake everybody in the house, and it's Mr. Mann's."

"I want muver!" sobbingly.

"You can't have her unless you get up and run home through the dark. I won't go with you. Some one is coming."

It was Mrs. Alden with a light. "What is the matter?" she asked in a reassuring tone.

Tip hid under the coverlet. "It's Tip," said Chan, "he woke up and was frightened by the owl——"

He emerged then. "'Tain't like our owl, and there's a bear on the floor——"

Mrs. Alden had thrown a small footspread over a chair, and it had slipped down. She picked it up with a light laugh.

"You ninny, there's your bear! And there are different kinds of owls. Ours is a little hoot-owl."

"And this is a big screech-owl. He's been driven away several times, but he comes back, but he can't hurt any one."

Mr. Mann came and sat down on the side of the bed. Tip leaned on his breast and sobbed, "If you'd woked up in the night and there wasn't any muver to say, 'What is it, Tip, dear?' and get you a drink and come and kiss you—and a horrid owl screeched, and that on the floor looked like a bear, and—and——"

"Tip, when I was a little boy and woke in the night, and sometimes had a cruel pain or a toothache I didn't have any mother ever to comfort me, nor any Mrs. Alden to bring a light and get me a drink, nor any brother to stay with me. And now you are not going to be afraid any more, and to-morrow morning you are going home to the dearest mother any little boy ever had."

Tip raised his head and took a drink.

"It's too bad," began Chan on a half cry of mortification. "I didn't want Tip to stay. He often wakes up in the night and makes a rumpus. I'm awful sorry."

"Chan, my little lad, don't worry a bit. And

Tip's going to be a brave boy now and go back to sleep again."

"Yes," said Tip. "You see, if I had known it wasn't a bear, and if the owl hadn't screamed, and it was all so strange——"

"Yes," and Mr. Mann nodded. "Perhaps you had better leave a light here, Mrs. Alden."

"I'll crawl up by Chan. Linn always lets me when I'm frightened in the night. And I won't be 'fraid any more."

"That's a nice boy. Chan, are you all right?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Good-night then," in a kindly tone.

Tip went to sleep pretty soon and then Chan unclasped the little arms and moved softly over to his own side. It was annoying, and yet it was funny. Of course he ought not have stayed. Things often happened to him in the night. And now the owl went to sleep and all was quiet.

Mr. Mann laughed a little, too. He saw the children on the doorstep crying because their mother had gone away and left them all alone, and as he was dropping off to sleep the refrain floated through his mind—"The beautifullest mother——"

Tip was all right the next morning and quite merry, though Chan teased him a little about the

bear. Dan had the surrey up to take his master down to the station. Then he would come back and drive Tip home. The boy agreed to this willingly.

"It's a nice bed," he said to Mrs. Alden, "and the room's a hundred times nicer than ours, and you have such a beautiful house, and the dogs and all, but my mother is over there, and I never was away before. But you were next best. If I hadn't any mother like Mr. Mann when he was a little boy, I should want you. You know just how to be good to little boys."

Mrs. Alden bent down and kissed him.

Chan looked very nice in the clean blouse with its big collar that he had brought along. And what a wonderful thing it was to be in a steam-car and fly along past the little towns to stop here and there and at last reach the great station where he was quite sure there was a million of people. Then the factory, with the noise of the machinery, the men at work, the office, and Mr. Ross going out to a restaurant to dinner, and then to see the doctor at two o'clock. It almost seemed to Chan as if he had lived a year.

The hospital, for it really was that, was like a palace with all its beautiful appointments. The doctor's office was not in any wise formidable,

and Dr. Richards had a kindly face and a voice that could have persuaded one into anything. Chan was a little shy at first, but the doctor coaxed out the story of how he had been hurt, and what had been done for him, and pressed around the hip to find the place of injury, and made him walk up and down, nodding now and then.

“He’s beginning to twist his knee a little. It’s a great pity the thing couldn’t have been done at once, but of course country practitioners are seldom expert surgeons, especially the older ones. Now, my little lad, come here and hold up your hand.”

Chan shrunk a little from the curious machine.

“Now look at the dark little bones in your hand.”

It was so wonderful that Chan really forgot to breathe. There in every finger was a little streak joined together by a sort of knob that was larger, and they went down the back of the hand and there were ever so many more little knobs at the wrist and one big one at the side. Was it really his hand, and all safe and sound!

“That’s the way I’m going to look at your hip, so now you won’t mind a bit.”

No, Chan didn’t mind, not even when the doctor gave him a pinch that hurt, for he kept looking

at his hand and thinking how curious it was that you could see through anybody like that.

"Well, it's not so bad, and will be what we call a bloodless operation. If it could have been done before it would have been only a simple relocation. There must be ether and a plaster jacket, but I think six weeks will make you over as good as new. There won't be any hurt, only the bother of getting well, and there'll be children and nurses to amuse you."

"And I'll walk just as well as before?" Chan's voice trembled with excitement.

"Oh, you'll run and play ball and skate and grow into a fine lad, and have grand good times."

The rest of the talk was between the doctor and Mr. Mann. Then Dr. Richards summoned a nurse, a pretty young woman with a little white cape over her shoulders and a big white apron, and asked her to take these guests to the sun-room.

They went up in an elevator. There was a room with a glass roof and windows here and there, with soft, blue curtains to temper the glare. There were children playing about, riding in miniature autos, two or three who walked with crutches, but they all looked happy and merry and were chatting and laughing or playing games,

and they were all so lovely and clean. The floor was covered with some soft, light stuff, and the girls had simple white dresses such as the twins wore for Sunday best. The nurses in odd little white caps and white aprons looked so cheerful and smiling, and in one nook, a small sort of ante-room, sat a lady reading to a group.

"Do you think of coming here, or are you only a visitor?" asked a nurse in a tone that somehow sounded like his mother's.

"Oh, I'm coming here. I've got to be mended a little, and you are all so nice, and it's so beautiful that I won't get lonesome, for, you see, there's eight of us at home and mother besides."

She patted him on the shoulder. What tender eyes he had, and how much love shone in his face!

"Eight? And any girls?"

"Oh, yes. There are only three boys and there's twins."

"And what is your name?"

He told her. "And Linn is named for a man who knew all about trees and plants, and Tip for General Harrison, and all the girls are flowers."

"Flowers?" with a questioning intonation.

"It's this way. There's Amaryllis—she's the oldest of us all,—then Marigold and Primrose and

Rhoda—but mother wouldn't have the rest of her name—and Laurel, they're the twins."

"Well, I declare!" she laughed softly. "When you are here I hope some of them will come. I should like to see them all. Why, you've a garden!"

Mr. Mann beckoned him, and he went across the room where a rosy boy stood.

"Oh," he exclaimed, "he ain't bad lame. I just couldn't walk without a crutch, and look at me now!" He took a few proud steps. "I'm going home next week. I'm all father has, and we haven't any mother. And then we are going way off to London. Do you know where that is?"

"Oh, yes, it's in England. And that's on the other Continent."

The little boy stared, then he added, "I'd like to stay here, only they don't keep well children, and father wants me. You must be sure to come."

Chan said a pretty, gracious good-by to them all, and down they went again in the queer elevator.

"I don't feel a bit afraid," and he squeezed Mr. Mann's hand. "But wasn't it all lovely, the sunshine and the nurses and the children? But

there was a little boy, not as big as me, who had only one leg. He'll always have to walk with a crutch, won't he? Oh, suppose I'd broken mine clear off!"

"He was probably run over. So many of them are. There are such crowds in the city."

"Then it's best not to live in the city. Oh, why can't they send all the little children into the country until they get grown up?"

"That might be a good scheme," smiling.

They went back to the office, where Mr. Mann wrote some letters, picked up a few papers, and slipped an elastic around them.

"Now we'll start for home. Have you had a nice day?"

"It's been grand! When will I have to come?"

"Next week."

"It's such a beautiful place," with a sigh of satisfaction. "And to think there's a light that can see straight through you!"

Mr. Mann knew Mrs. Firth would be doubly anxious to see her boy, so they drove over to the old red house at once. How queer and small and dingy it looked to Chan, but there was mother. And he felt sorry for the little boy going to London without any mother. After all he guessed mothers were best.

Mr. Mann made the few necessary explanations.

"You've been so wonderfully good about it. I don't know how you'll ever get paid. I suppose I ought to advise a little with the minister and his wife. 'Twould seem queer-like to settle it all by myself. They've been good, too. Why, I can't seem to make it real."

He thought a moment. "No," he returned, "don't say anything about it until after Sunday. You'll have the neighbors in advising, telling you different things that will upset you; and you'll feel all at sea, maybe. There's nothing to be done, you don't even have to get any clothes ready, only keep the little lad cheery. He's had a nice time and will have ever so much to tell you. I'll be over on Sunday again. After eight or ten days you can go down and see him."

She laughed with her eyes full of tears, and her face flushed. How pretty she looked! "The beautifullest mother." And she had almost a child's innocence with all her good sense.

Oh, what an evening it was! Chan laid his head on his mother's lap, sitting beside her on a bench, and the younger children were around on the floor, they couldn't get close enough.

"Why, it's like some of the things in the old

fairy book about palaces and such, and people waiting on you and everything," declared Prim enthusiastically.

"I'd almost have my own leg broken," said Linn, "to go to such a place as that. But what gets me is that thing that lets a body see through you. Did you truly see the bones in your hand? You didn't imagine it?"

"Oh, truly, truly," in a most positive tone.

"And he could see your hip? What did he say it was?"

"He didn't say, only that it could be easily mended and that I wouldn't feel the hurt. I sha'n't mind a little hurt." And then he told them how nice the little boy walked who was going to London, and about the other little boy who would never have but one real leg, a little girl who was just getting over some dreadful burns, and a dozen others, to say nothing of the nice nurses. "And they are all so merry and happy. But there are others in the wards that can't sit up. We didn't see them. And mother's coming down when I am well enough to see company. Oh, I wish you could all come."

Didn't they wish it as well? What ohs and ahs and sighs of regret there were. Certainly Chan was a hero.

"But what an awful sight of money it must cost," said Marigold.

That thought kept them silent for at least a minute. Then Chan announced in a solemn tone, "When I get to be a man I'm going to pay Mr. Mann back. Then he may be old and need the money."

"I hope you will," rejoined his mother.

"But sometimes people go to hospitals and don't pay anything," said Linn.

There were three busy days getting ready for school. Marigold rummaged, picked out some things that could be made over, and she and Rilla sewed. Sunday noon Chan and his mother went to the parsonage and told the event to Mr. and Mrs. Burnham.

"That is really wonderful," exclaimed the minister. "I'm glad the Lord put it in some one's heart to do this. But are you sure the man is reliable and that in the end the bills will not come back to you?"

"I expect to pay it some time, but I couldn't just now, and it ought to be done at once," was the mother's reply.

"Oh, Chan, I hope it won't be dreadful. Doctors do love to cut and slash so. Is it a free place? I wouldn't trust them."

"There won't be anything bad, only just to push something back in place and no cutting," said Chan with tremendous decision.

"Well, I hope you'll come out of it all right. Have you known this man long?"

That was Mr. Burnham's question. Back-country folks swing between too much suspicion and too much credulity.

"Not very long. He took the children up to the Falls on a picnic, and gave them a splendid time. Dan Wilson lives there."

"Yes, I think I've heard of him. The people over there at Grafton are rather of the high and mighty order. What family has he?"

"None at all but a housekeeper."

"Well, I shall pray for the utmost success."

"You see, he's taken a great fancy to Chan," Mrs. Firth explained, as if she felt she must apologize for the unusual happening.

"I hope he will prove a good and true friend to you, Chandler. The Lord be with you and preserve you from all ill."

The minister and his wife looked at each other when the guests were gone.

"It's rather queer," said she, "and I wish there was a little more time to inquire. I suppose it *is* all right. He bought the Gedney place, and seems

to be a man of means. And of course there's nothing like a love affair in it, the girls are too young, and no one would think of her with eight children. Oh, I'll venture a guess that he means to adopt one, and Chan is a delicate little chap and likely won't be able to help along much. I think that's it, and she didn't want to suggest it lest it might fall through."

"Well, that is an excellent solution, and I hope it may prove true," returned the minister. Monday was washday in Denby, rain or shine, so everybody was busy. Mr. Mann had arranged to come over for Chan in the afternoon and take him down on Tuesday to get a little used to the place. After all, it was a sad parting, only Mr. Mann *would* look on the bright side, and inside of two weeks Chan's mother would go down to see him, and then one of the children, perhaps several of them. When Chan was well they would have a picnic down in the city.

So Chan stepped into the phaeton and waved his hand, keeping the tears back until they were well on the road, but the others went into the house and had a good cry. Not to see him for six weeks, maybe longer! They spent a doleful evening, and went to bed early.

CHAPTER X

HOW LAUREL SET OUT TO FIND CHAN

EVERYTHING looks so different on a bright, sunny morning. The children had to hurry off to school, for it was a long walk. Tip didn't want to go very much, but Rilla said, "If you stay home you must pick and stem grapes for me all day. I'm going to make jam."

So he thought he would go, for Prim always made things funny. Rilla did only occasionally. She was such a busy little housekeeper. Rhoda helped pick and tried to train Laurel in ways of usefulness; but Rilla was afraid she would eat too many, and kept an eye on her. Mrs. Firth was to be two days at the Briggs's sewing, and they were very much interested in the matter of Chandler.

"I'd just let him do all he wanted to," said Mrs. Briggs energetically. "If he wants to send him away to school for an education, I'd let him. Chan would make a nice minister, he's kind of delicate looking, and if he should grow up tall—his father was tall, I remember—he'd look fine in a pulpit."

I think ministers ought to look according. A little stumpy man, or cross-eyed, or with a poor delivery, ought never study for a minister. Linn's smart to learn, though he declares he'll never be a farmer. Maybe this Mr. Mann will give him a lift by and by. There's no chance round here for boys unless their fathers have big farms, and you just take whatever good comes along. I'm sure you deserve it. I don't see how you've kept them all together and looking so nice. It was such a pity about the twins."

Mrs. Firth colored a little. She was always hearing that.

She sewed away, and kept following Chan in her mind. To-morrow would be the crucial day. She didn't have to live that just now. He and Mr. Mann would have a nice lunch together, and there would be some little things to laugh at.

Aunt Patty still harped on the fact that the farm at Tory Corners had not been sold and the money divided. There was no justice in one heir's taking everything. And who knew that was really her grand-aunt's will? Lawyers were very ready to feather their own nest.

Bessy Firth almost wished she was home, but there was the dollar to earn, and that gave her courage.

Rilla picked out some of the nicest bunches of grapes, for Mrs. Elsdon had offered them four cents a pound, and grapes were heavy. Then she stemmed and washed and put on the big kettle and let them boil while she was getting the dinner for the children. Afterward she mashed and strained and stewed them down again. They made such nice jam to eat on the supper mush, or with pancakes in the morning. It saved a sight of butter.

Some one stepped inside the door. It was Granny Keen, and Rilla had no heart for such a guest, and no time, either.

Granny Keen had a life-right in one room in the house of her stepson, and all her garden truck, so she considered herself quite an independent woman. She was very fond of neighborly affairs.

"I declare I'm real tuckered out," and she dropped into the big rocking-chair. "I do believe I ain't as young as I was ten year ago," with a little cackle. "But I did want to know the rights of the story, so I could set folks straight. People do get things so mixed up. Was there some one who took your Chan down to New York to have an operation, and is he going to lose his leg?"

"Oh, no," returned Rilla impatiently.

"Well, I said I knew you'd never be willin'. He might better be a little lame than to have only one leg. An' who's this man that took him down, any relation?"

"It's a gentleman who lives at Grafton. He took a great fancy to Chan, and wanted to see if something couldn't be done for him. Dr. Breen advised it in the spring, but mother didn't see her way clear."

"I heard she got some money from that old lady after all, and a great bundle of truck."

"Yes," said Rilla briefly.

"'Nough to pay all expenses?"

"We don't know what they will be, and mother will pay as she can," evasively. "Mr. Mann is to take charge."

"Now can you be sure he's honest? Men do cheat so nowadays; and as for the truth they don't tell it half the time, nor t'other half either. Don't you think it's a great risk? Did your mother go down and see the place an' the doctors? Don't you know 'bout Mimy Fisk, who went down to see about her eye? Oh, no, 'twas afore your time. I don't believe you were born then. She was husband's niece, and she went down to the city and paid away fifty good dollars, an' it didn't do a mite of good. When she come home she

couldn't see a mite out of that eye, not even with specs. I don't put much faith in doctors. Do you really think his leg will have to come off? An' he so young, too! 'Pears to me I'd about as leave he'd die. We've all got to die some time."

Rilla wiped away a tear. "There is no likelihood of his losing his leg, I believe," she said firmly.

"Well, you can't 'most always tell. Queer things happen in most unexpected places. I wouldn't be too confident. Is his board going to be paid, or is it one of them charity places?"

"No, he is a paid patient, in a beautiful place."

"Then you mark my words. When their board is paid they go on keeping 'em, and when it isn't, they shove 'em out mighty quick. You can't depend upon any one in this deceitful world and vale of sorrows. Any of the children had measles or whooping-cough?"

"They've all had the whooping-cough."

"Well, I declare to man! How did your mother stand it? I should o' thought she'd gone crazy. An' it's a wonder she didn't take it. People can have it twice I've heerd. Now, in old times you had it once for all and was done with

it. But times change so much you never know just where you stand. Got plenty of grapes, Rilla?"

"Yes. Will you have some?" thinking to dismiss her guest.

"I don't mind if I do. Dave's wife cut so many off for green grape jell that we ain't hardly any ripe ones. Yes, I'll take some." Amaryllis did them up in a paper bag and handed them to her.

"Now, when'll you be likely to hear about Chan? I'll feel reel anxious. For you know there's that blood poisonin' that sets in with so many things, and lockjaw from just a little scratch with a rusty nail. It's strange how many things there are to take people out of the world, an' after all we don't know much about the next one."

"We are not certain when we'll hear."

"Well, I'll stop in again. I always feel sympathy for them in trouble, the Bible commands you to. Much obleeged for the grapes. Oh, Rilla, has your mother made any risin' lately? Dave's wife alwers gets it sour, and her bread is enough to turn one blue-mouldy. Your mother's is alwers so good."

Sometimes Rilla gave the poor old woman a loaf, but now she went to the closet and merely

broke off a piece of the "risin'." Granny stood uncertain.

"You'll likely hear the last of the week?"

"Yes—perhaps," indifferently.

"I sh'd want to hear every day by that telegraft or the other thing. Strange now, ain't it, that you can hear talking through that sort of funnel-like thing? Mr. Beers has one in the store. But 'twould be a good ways to go. Well, well, I hope Chan won't lose his leg or his life."

Rilla laughed and cried both when she was gone. Then she stopped to ask herself whether she fixed her gelatin to make the jam stiffen a little bit without cooking it away so much. She concluded she hadn't. And where were the twins? She called up the stairway, as she heard some stirring round.

"Why didn't you bring Laurel down?" she asked of Rhoda.

"Laurel hasn't been there. I've been straightenin' things. That garret looks like a hurrah's nest."

What a "hurrah's nest" was Rilla had never been able to learn. It was a Denby provincialism for unlimited disorder.

"Go and look for her, then."

Meanwhile Rilla set off her jam to cool a little.

"I'd better take the chicken bones and make a pot-pie," she ruminated. "The children will be as hungry as bears when they come home. School does make them so hungry. They can't eat apples and pears in between. It takes an awful lot to fill up children, and potatoes and dumplings with plenty of gravy go tip-top. There isn't much chicken," viewing it ruefully, "but it will have to do."

"I can't find Laurel," announced Rhoda. "Twins is an awful bother, ain't they, Rilla? You see, you can find one, but you never do know where 'tother one is."

"Go look in that little grapevine corner. I dare say she's been stuffing herself with grapes and there'll be pains and aches all night, and poor mother'll have to be up coddlin' her."

"Laurel hasn't much sense," said this superior infant. "Do you think she'll be real smart, Rilla? She's just as old as I am and she don't know half as much."

"Well, you use your knowledge in finding her," returned the elder.

"And I'll hit her a good slap," Rhoda said under her breath. "There's trouble enough in this house about poor Chan, and so many young uns going to school. There shouldn't be twins,

that there just shouldn't." She looked up and down the road.

"I'll bet she's started for the Briggs's and mommy. O dear, I can't go 'way down there. She shall have two real hard slaps when I do catch her."

With all her wisdom Rhoda had taken the wrong tack.

Laurel had sat on the doorstep a while with Dolly in her arms, talking to herself as to what she should do for entertainment, though she didn't use so long a word. Then a bright thought flashed across the infantile brain that her companion must share.

"Tell you what 'e'll do, Dolly. We'll do to man's house an' det Chan. Man didn't oughter take Chan 'way off to det leg mended."

She rose with Dolly clasped close, and looked about wistfully.

"Man does dis way. Dan does, too. Yes, dis yight way. We'll do an' say, 'Man, det your carwidge and bing Chan home yight away, 'cause mommy cried when he was tookened away. Naughty, bad man.'"

Sometimes she ran, sometimes she trotted. She was shorter and fatter than Rhoda. Then all out of breath she sat down under a tree.

"Dreffel hot, Dolly! Tears run out all over my face, and ain't dot no hank'snuf." She took her dress-skirt and wiped them off, then performed the same office for Dolly, which did not seem to improve her complexion. Dolly had bright blue eyes made with ink, and rather straggling black eyelashes, but Laurel had wanted them, the eyes, "made big so 'tould see," and thought them "bu'ful."

"All wested now," and she rose presently. "Long way, Dolly, but we'll fin' man an' say, 'Naughty man. We 'ant Chan an' we won't have his leg cut off. Dest do an' det Chan.' An' he'll be so 'faid cause we'll be vewy andry, real mad that means, an' he'll do an' bing Chan wight away, an' pomise to be good all the while," in solemn tones.

Dolly hugged her up closer. Dolly always did her part of the responsiveness.

Then they went on and on. They chased a squirrel running in and out of the fence, they tried to get a gorgeous blue butterfly, and laughed when a robin looked down at them from a fence post. She told Dolly a very much jumbled up story that she was honest enough to say was Prim's, but Prim wouldn't have recognized it. Then they grew warm and tired again and sat down on a big

flat stone that was the coping of the post and rail fence. The post had the split side out, and it made a back to the seat, and it was very comfortable. The soft winds blew about her, the birds sang to her, the laden bees hummed, the grasshopper whirred, and the band sent the little girl fast asleep.

Amaryllis fixed her dinner and put the potatoes in, the dumplings would not need to cook so long. She missed Chan's willing feet and hands already. Then she looked with satisfaction on her jars of jam and set them out of harm's way, cleared up her kitchen a little, looked up and down the road, and then sat down in the old rocker a few moments. There was a noisy eruption which might have been the whole eight instead of half of them.

"Oh, did you see the twins?"

"Where have they gone—to school?"

"Why, Laurel strayed off and I sent Rhoda to look for her. I'm just tired out. I've picked grapes and made jam, and there's a great bag full of nice ones for Mrs. Elsdon, and Granny Keen was here dolefuller than the day of doom. Linn, won't you go out and feed the chickens and then chop up some wood? Rhoda thought Laurel might have gone out to find mother. Sure you didn't see anything of them?"



SENT THE LITTLE GIRL FAST ASLEEP.—*Page 168.*

"Oh, we came 'cross lots. It's just as sure a way home as if you took the longest way round. What funny things those old adages are," laughed Marigold.

"And I have a bran'-new word," almost shouted Prim. "I had to stay in at recess and write 'Coliseum' over twenty times. Then I looked at some pictures in the dictionary. Rill, do you really believe the Lord made all these queer animals or that they just grew?"

"What's your word?" asked Linn, stopping at the back door.

"It's just good, and I thought of a story to it—real funny."

"I don't see anything funny about 'Good.'"

"'Twasn't '*good*,' silly; it was 'Megatherium,' and there was a picture of him made out of the bones they found."

"Well, I can make a gyascutus out of a potato, four matches, and some chicken feathers and a bit of red flannel. What do they do with your meg thing? I don't believe he is half as good as the kron—and all that lingo."

"I think I'll put a few more syllables to him, and I'll spring him on Miss Norton. When she doesn't know, she gets as mad as a hen in a fence.

But you've got to spring it sudden on her and act as if you were dying for the knowledge."

"What were you doing to be kept in?" asked the eldest sister.

"A good deed of course. Evil is only good misplaced; somewhere else it would be the right thing——"

"Hush your nonsense. See if there are any eggs—I haven't had a minute this livelong day," said Rilla wearily.

"Are livelong days longer than any other?" asked Marigold seriously.

"Well, it's what you have to put in them. And Granny Keen 'most set me wild about Chan."

"Everybody's wild about him," said Prim. "I 'most began to think he'd have to be taken all apart and put together like a dissecting puzzle. And I couldn't convince them that he only had to be pushed into place and all would be right again. Oh, *don't* you want to hear? How *can* we wait?"

"I hope that will be all," said Rilla, for somehow Granny Keen had made her rather despondent.

"All? Of course it will be," Marigold flung out rather fiercely. "Don't you believe Mr.

Mann? I'd trust him all the world over, and sure I'd trust him as little way as New York. His face is so good and steady, and his voice wants to make you sing for joy. And that elegant dimple! I wish I had it in my cheek this minute."

"Lay the table, you girls, though, Prim, I sent you after the eggs, Linn will forget them. Oh, I do wonder if Laurel's found!"

"Rilla, don't you think you borrow trouble? If a thing is so, why it's so, and if it isn't, all the worrying won't make it so. Oh, how splendid that pot-pie smells! Rilla, ain't you afraid the dumplings will fall and be heavy, or some of it burn?"

The last sentence was uttered in such a lugubrious tone that Rilla laughed, tired as she was.

Prim came in with four eggs.

"That will just make up the dozen for Mrs. Winter, and she always pays cash down."

Linn had thrown the corn into the chicken houses and shut them up for the night. The fragrance of the supper lured him, and he just stopped to pick up an armful of wood. Mother would have her supper at Mrs. Briggs's; the twins, likely. So they sat down, and the platefuls disappeared rapidly.

“There ain’t much chicken,” said Tip. “We had the chicken yesterday.”

“Tip,” began his brother solemnly, “there was once a man stopped at a country hotel, and when he came down to breakfast there was only a dish of mackerel and a cup of mustard on the table, and he said, ‘Is there anything else? I don’t like mackerel.’ ‘Then help yourself to mustard,’ said the landlord. Tip, help yourself to potatoes and crust, and bread and jam. See what a lot of things you have.”

Tip studied a moment. “Didn’t he have *any* breakfast? Mustard is bitey and burny. And you put plasters on sick people.”

“Tip, you are progressing. Marigold, isn’t the first physical science, and the other,—well, that pertains to medical——”

“Therapeutics,” spelled Prim triumphantly.

“Oh, Primrose, your knowledge astounds me, especially in the spelling line.”

“That’s in Friday’s lesson. I’ll bet there won’t be one there to spell it right.”

“Hello!” Linn jumped up. A rough country wagon had halted at the door. “What’s to pay now!”

Farmer Bird sat there with a bundle in his arms.

"This is one of your young 'uns I guess. I found her up head of the lane asleep. Why n't you take better care of her with night comin' on?"

"Oh!" exclaimed Linn. "Rilla, come here. Why, it's Laurel."

"Are you tall enough to catch holt of her?" He leaned over a little. "Hold Pete steady an' I'll step out."

"Oh, I can take her," and Rilla stretched up both arms. "Where was she?"

"Head o' the lane, leanin' 'gainst a post. Steady now. Gee! She sleeps sound as a turtle in winter!"

He lowered her carefully into Rilla's arms. Then she stirred a little and murmured, "'Ants muver!"

"Poor baby! Thank you over a dozen times, Mr. Bird."

"Sho now! Anybody'd 'a' done it."

"Then I should have thanked anybody," and there was a laugh in Rilla's voice.

"Better look closer after her next time. Gid-dap, Pete."

"Up the lane. Rhoda went the other way." She stood Laurel down on the ground. "Naughty baby to stray way off."

"Touldn't find man's house an' 'anted Chan."

"Oh, the idea! I wonder if she really went after Chan?"

"'Anted poor Chan. Naughty man to tate him away."

Rilla led her into the house. Marigold had just lighted the lamp, and it made her blink her eyes.

"'Ant to go to bed. Dolly so tiwed. Lally tiwed too."

"Don't you want any supper?"

"Lally so tiwed."

"Poor baby. I'll just put her to bed. Oh, what a dirty face!"

She made no demur at having it washed, and the elder undressed her.

"That's queer," began Prim. "Laurel isn't given to straying off. O my! Suppose she'd had to stay there all night!"

"Oh, she wouldn't! We'd all turned out and searched."

"It's funny, her going after Chan. Hello! There's some more carriage company," and Marigold ran out.

It was her mother and Rhoda brought home by Jim Briggs in the buggy.

"Where's Laurel? Have you found her?" was the mother's anxious inquiry.

"Oh, yes, she's safe in bed. I sent Rhoda out to look for her. Did she come clear down to the Briggs's?"

"Mat picked her up. Dear me! I've had a sort of worriment for the last hour. They would make us stay to supper as Jim was going over to Lauter's. Jim's courting pretty steady. What did get into the children!"

"Laurel was going to find Chan. And I've been so busy," explained Amaryllis. "Look at my jars of jam, and Granny Keen came and 'most worried me to death talking it over, as if we didn't feel bad enough ourselves. Oh, do you suppose——"

"I'm just going to pin my faith to Mr. Mann, with a good, big safety pin at that!" interposed Marigold. "And by this time it's all over, and they'll keep Chan comfortable as a kitten. I won't let any one worry me with their horrid supposes."

"That's right, Marigold. I wonder why everybody wants you to look on the dark side?" said the mother.

"I suppose Laurel was losted," began Rhoda. "Why couldn't she stayed around the door where we could see her. And I was so tired my legs 'most fell out."

"Well, you are all safe now," said the mother.

"Rilla, your jam looks very nice. And Mrs. Briggs offered to dip over those black skirts for me, and they'll make a nice dress. Goodness knows, I need it bad enough."

"And when will my coat get made?" inquired Linn.

"Oh, I'll have some time presently," said the mother.

They cleared the table and straightened up things, put Rhoda to bed, and Tip, who sniffed a little because he wanted to see Chan.

"Oh, hush up!" exclaimed the tired mother.

The older children studied a while. Rilla sat down in the old big rocker and nodded, and presently the lights were out and all was quiet in the little old red house, but the last thought of them all was about Chan, Chan who was roaming about in a sort of enchanted land still full of fragrances.

CHAPTER XI

THE CROWN OF HOPE

MR. MANN came in to see how it fared with him. Nurse Jane made Chan's acquaintance at once. No, indeed, he wasn't going to be afraid, for Dr. Richards said many little boys stood worse things than that.

They fixed him all right, and gave him something to smell of that seemed like apple and pear blooms, and when he woke up from a lovely sleep he was lying on a little cot with something hard and queer around his body that startled him at first.

"It's the plaster cast," Nurse Jane explained. "They pushed the joint back in place and it's all right with you now, and you will grow straight as a yardstick. The plaster will hold it there, you see, so it can't slip away."

"Did they have to use a trowel?"

There was a little glint of mischief in Chan's eye, and Nurse Jane laughed at such a good sign. Then she washed his face with some kind of perfumed water and he dropped off to sleep again.

It was a rather disturbed sleep with curious half-dreams of sliding down hill over very crusty and uneven snow. Last winter he had never been able to slide down hill or go sledding.

He woke up late in the afternoon with the feeling that some one was looking at him. It wasn't his dear momsey, but perhaps the next best, Mr. Mann.

"Oh," stretching up his arms with a sweet, welcoming cry.

Mr. Mann leaned over until his warm, rosy face touched the pale one, and then he actually kissed it, kissed it for the sake of the little boy he used to dream about and never had.

"And it's all right, little fellow. It wasn't so very bad after all, but it would have made you a cripple for life if it had not been attended to. I'll send word to your mother. She'll be so glad to hear."

"And the nurse is so nice. Oh, how many poor little hurt children there are! And to think they can be mended and grow nice and straight. It's like that pool mother reads about in the Bible where some one stirred the water and they went in and were made whole. How many beautiful things there are in the world, and people! Will you go and see mother?"

"Yes, to-night. I didn't go home yesterday, I wanted to see how you were this morning."

"Oh, I'm all right, but I know how a turtle feels crawling around with that hard shell on his back, only I can't even crawl. But I'll just lie here straight and not make any trouble, and I'll think of the funny stories Prim tells, and the ridiculous ideas the twins have, and how Tip cries over foolish little things, and the chickens and the squirrels that are so tame now, and the children coming home from school, and Rilla cooking good things to eat when mother is out to work."

"You'll have enough to entertain yourself then, and that's the way to get well. I'll be in to-morrow and tell you about all the folks."

Then Mr. Mann bent over and gave him another kiss. Why, it was almost as good as having a real father.

It seemed very queer to lie on one's back and just have your head held up a little to be fed, but Nurse Jane was so nice. She reminded him of Mrs. Alden, and she wore such a pretty, soft white something that looked like a big handkerchief crossed over her bosom. Her hands were so soft, and her hair had a little waviness in it and was partly covered by an odd, dainty cap.

Sometimes sharp pains went shooting through Chan's hip, and oh, if he could only move his body a little! So he made his arms do duty. Sometimes they were soldiers marching to and fro, sometimes one kept store and the other came to buy things. He could see the hens and the chickens and the lazy old cat that was shrewd enough to keep out of the way of the twins, for he didn't want Laurel to hug him nor Rhoda to cuff his ears; and the flower bed, and the long rows of corn that he used to play was a forest and get lost in it, as a little German child in his reading book did; and there was that lovely Pilot over to Mr. Mann's, and cunning, frolicsome Bitsy. Oh, what a splendid place the world was, especially the country!

Mr. Mann brought such good news from home. Everybody was well, and next week his mother would come in to see him.

They took the plaster off, and swathed him in a bandage, and put a light sort of frame clear down to his ankle. That wasn't nearly so bad, for now he could be bolstered up and feed himself and look over some story books full of beautiful pictures. Oh, if Prim could see them, and the spandy new stories! For they had to keep changing their fairy stories and adding to those

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about animals, which were really Æsop's Fables. Linn could stretch them out marvelously.

And one morning he ventured to sing a little, not any song of words, but just as the robin and the thrush did. Of course now they would be going off somewhere. Oh, what was the South like where there wasn't any snow, and flowers all the year round? Up and down the music went, now just a mere sound, then a merry little trill like a whistle. Why, you might almost think it was a thrush.

A little hand almost like a bird's claw was thrust out and caught Nurse Jane's dress. She turned. This was a very pale, thin little fellow with big, wistful blue eyes.

"Is it a truly bird or is some one singing?" he asked. "It sounds like singing, but there isn't any words."

"I think it's a little boy over beyond. Shall I tell him to stop?"

"Oh, no, no! It's so beautiful. It brings the country and the spring right before you. It was June when I came here. You're all so good, better than the nurse at home, but the country is so lovely."

The singing had stopped. "What is the boy like?" Arthur asked.

“Oh, he’s a country boy—well, not exactly pretty or plain, with soft brown eyes, and a sweet sort of voice that sounds as if it had a laugh in it, and he is cheerful and merry.”

“Is he going to get well? What happened to him?”

“Oh, yes. It wasn’t a very serious matter, only he would have been lame for life if it hadn’t been attended to. In a few weeks he will be able to go home.”

Arthur sighed, and some tears rolled down his cheeks.

“I wish he’d sing some more. Oh, Nurse Jane, do you think I could be taken over there and see him? I’d like to see him.”

This ward was not all one long space with the cots in a row, but was made into little booths by the use of screens. The very severe cases were down to the lower end, indeed some of the fractious patients were by themselves. Nurse Jane looked at the poor little fellow for whom the doctors said now there was no hope, for his little heart was ’most worn out. The operations had eased him some, but it was a very bad case.

“We will just have to keep him comfortable,” the doctor said. “It can’t be for long. Poor, patient little fellow. Money can’t do everything.”

"I'll see," Nurse Jane said. The little fellow in the next cot to Chan was going away in a day or two.

"I've been singing," exclaimed Chan with a bright flush as the nurse approached. "Mother's coming to-day, and I'm so glad. I just wanted to jump up and down. Did I make too much noise? I'm sorry——"

"No. You might sing some more. The children liked it, and it was charming. There is a little boy over beyond who was just delighted. But don't sing yourself tired."

"Oh, I don't believe anything would tire me, I feel so well. Why, I'm gay as a lark."

The nurse smiled as she went on.

"Who is that singing?" asked the head nurse. "Why, it's like a bird. Has any child here a voice like that?"

"It is the little Firth boy that Mr. Mann brought here. He certainly has a wonderful voice, and he's the cheeriest little fellow. It wasn't a bad case at all. His mother is coming to-day, and I'm anxious to see what she is like. There are eight children in the family and all as sound as a nut, yet they must be poor, too."

"Well, I should say the child had a fortune

in his voice. Just listen to that! It's as clear as a bell."

"That Wilmer boy is going out of the ward to-day or to-morrow, and Arthur wondered if he couldn't come nearer the fascinating voice. Why, it quite roused him."

"I don't see any objection. A change is beneficial sometimes."

Yes, Chan was very merry, but he had to keep so much of it inside. It couldn't help shining in his eyes and playing about his lips in the gayest of smiles. He wished he knew a song about mothers. There were some about babies. Was there ever such a long morning! And then came dinner. What if mother had not come!

"Don't get excited," said the nurse, smiling as well. But his little hands were moist, and though his cheeks were red, the little dampness at the edge of his forehead made the hair curl somewhat. Why, he was quite a good-looking child now that the tan had gone off and the few freckles disappeared.

Mrs. Firth had managed her new frock. It wasn't exactly tailor-made, but it looked very well, only the coat and the bonnet were—well, hardly passable. And in the train Mr. Mann kept thinking. He wondered how he had come to notice

women's clothes so much. Mrs. Alden was always so neat and trim, and Mrs. Ross. Oh, now he had it, and he smiled until the dimple went almost through his cheek.

"You must have a new coat and hat," he said. "City people dress so much more. And for Chan's sake. He'll be mortal proud of you before the nurses. And no doubt you'll see the doctor. I'll take you to that friend, Mrs. Ross, my partner's wife, and she'll tell you what to get, something just right and not too fine."

"Mr. Mann—but——" Her lip quivered and she was breathless, speechless after she had glanced at his steadfast face.

"Oh," he said in a most matter-of-fact tone, "Chan'll pay it all back some day. You needn't be afraid."

Mrs. Firth wasn't a born fighter or a born arguer, and for the last six months or so Amaryl-lis and Linn had taken it upon themselves to advise, and Rill's was so good and sensible that she yielded as she had to her husband except on the two or three occasions. The boys must certainly try to pay back everything. She found Mrs. Ross living very simply, and certainly cordial. They had a congenial topic—children.

"Though I can't imagine what I should do with

eight," said Mrs. Ross. "My three keep me pretty busy sewing. And you haven't any machine. And there's stockings to darn."

"You don't have 'em all at once, and the big ones help take care of the little ones. Marigold darns all the stockings, and Rilla's the handiest girl. Then Primrose is so fond of knitting, and she's the greatest speller you ever saw. The boys do a good bit of gardening. Their father was great on that business. And we have the house, so there isn't any rent to pay."

"That does make a difference. Rent eats up a lot of money."

So they went out and shopped; not at the great stores, but at rather quiet places. Mrs. Firth was using her eyes everywhere so as to tell Rilla when she went home. Then they returned and had a sort of pick-up luncheon, but oh, how pretty the dishes were! And the table was arranged in such a neat fashion, like Mrs. Burnham's. The ordinary Denby people were not great on style. This would suit Marigold. And the children were so well trained. And hers were noisy with fun.

Mr. Mann came for her. Woman-like, they had gossiped a little about him. Of course Mrs. Ross thought he never could be foolish enough to assume the care of eight children, though she

rather suspected he meant to adopt Chan. They both agreed about his virtues, and how benevolent he was. Mrs. Firth was glad to hear how generous he had been to the Rosses. Then it wasn't such a wonderful thing that he should befriend them.

"I suspect he wasn't very happy in his married life. From what I can gather I think his wife was one of the driving, saving folks, and lived in a kind of penurious manner. And now he has such a splendid home, and Mrs. Alden, have you seen her?"

"Oh, no, I haven't been over to the house. Some of the children have. Marigold thinks it even ahead of the parsonage, and it's ever so much larger."

"And now he ought to have a nice wife who would study his happiness and who would pull the way he wants to and let him be generous when he feels so inclined. It's such a pleasure to him. And I can't help thinking, even hoping—it would be just the thing——"

She looked intently at Mrs. Firth. The face had the sweet innocence of a child.

"What would?" she asked almost eagerly.

"If he would marry Mrs. Alden. She is a perfect housekeeper and she has such a sympa-

thetic sort of nature and such a sweet temper. I've known her for years."

"Oh, that *would* be splendid! Why, little Tip cried in the night—he often wakes up frightened, and she came in and cuddled him up so, 'just like you, mommy,' Chan said, and soon hushed him to sleep. All of 'em liked her so much. And if he should take any poor, little orphan child out of an asylum as he once spoke of, she'd be as good as an own mother to him."

She wasn't even thinking of saddling one of her own children upon him, Mrs. Ross could see that. However did the absurd idea come into her head that he might be attracted to Mrs. Firth?

When he came in he was surprised to see how much she was improved by her new coat and hat. And she had a very curious and lovely feeling toward him, as if she had in some way surprised the secret of his life, something that was to make him very happy, and surely he deserved it.

Then they went to the hospital, and he presented her to two of the doctors and the nurses, and heard such good accounts of Chandler. And Nurse Jane convoyed her to the ward and left her kneeling there by the cot with her boy's arms about her neck.

Of course they cried a little, but it was for

pure joy, and then she took the chair by the cot, and laid aside her hat, and they began to talk. He wanted to know all that had happened, and laughed at some of the lugubrious predictions.

"Oh, won't I surprise them all when I come home straight and don't have to wobble! Of course I'll have to be careful for a while, and I can't skate any this winter, but then, I couldn't last winter, and it wasn't so awful hard. Why, you can do without a good many things if you put something else in their places."

Then she had to tell what Linn was studying, and about all she could remember was the geography of Japan and China. And Marigold looked after the chickens a good deal, and they had sold a barrel of winter pears and two barrels of apples, and had orders for all their quinces. Prim was finding big words and putting ridiculous stories to them, and Laurel still talked crooked words, and how she had started for Mr. Mann's house to bring Chan back, and about the neighbors, even to Granny Keen, who was quite sure Chan would never come back alive.

"And I've never been sick nor had a bit of fever. Dr. Richards says I am the very best patient he ever had," laughed Chan.

"And Jim Briggs is going to be married at

Thanksgiving. Mrs. Briggs is always cleaning house, I do believe, and now she's making her new rag carpet. Goldie and Prim are going to sew rags for her. She's got two breadths yet to make. And they have a new baby at the Warners', and Katy Burnham's been sick again, and old Mr. Cross is dead."

"Dear, how many changes I'll find when I get back. But it'll be just grand to see me go walking round on two good legs! And did you make Rilla's pretty new dress?"

Yes, and she had made Linn such a nice coat out of Aunt Hitty's cloak, and Goldie had a new dress out of a plaid skirt that the girls at school thought was splendid.

"And you've got a nice new bonnet, mother. Oh, and a new coat!"

She blushed. "Yes, Mr. Mann insisted that I should have them. I s'pose he wanted the folks here to think your mother was some great things. And, Chan——" She blushed still deeper. "I didn't have the money, but he said when you were big enough to work you'd pay it back. And oh, Chan, I hope you will and all the cost here. You can't pay back the pure goodness part, but the money——"

"Oh, yes. You'll see. Linn and I will

straighten up things. Why, mother, presently we'll be grown-up men, and Linn is bound to make money some way. I wish he could be a doctor in a big city. And Rilla would make such a splendid nurse. Think of eight big sons and daughters! But we'd like the twins to stay little."

"Oh, Chan, I was so afraid something would happen to you."

She had her arms about his neck, and was kissing him fondly.

"Why, it wasn't bad at all, momsey. They didn't have to cut a bit. And the other day they brought in a little boy run over, with his leg all smashed, and they did have to cut it off. And another one caught in a machine, with his scalp partly torn off, and nurse said they fixed him up as good as new. It's just wonderful! But they only had to screw me up in a vise," and he laughed. "I was a good deal afraid when Mr. Mann first talked about it. Don't you know they always tell you it doesn't hurt to have a tooth pulled and it just does. But now they put you in a lovely sleep and you don't know anything about it."

"I'm so glad," she returned, "and that you can get quite well. Oh, are you—is everybody sure?"

"Yes. Why, I can feel it even if I am bound up tight and my leg stretched out. But you're

the dearest mother, and I shall be so glad to get back to you all."

Then they kissed each other dozens of times, and held hands like lovers. It seemed only such a little while when Nurse Jane came and said Mr. Mann was waiting for his mother, and if he wasn't too much excited he might see him for a few moments. She thought it would make the good-by easier.

"Oh, I'm not excited," said Chan with shining eyes. "I'm only full and running over with happiness."

The nurse was right. Mrs. Firth had been wondering how she *could* leave her boy, but it was quite a tranquil parting after all.

"Now you must lie perfectly still for half an hour. I'll put a little clock here, but I wish you might go to sleep."

"I'll try," returned Chan, "but I'd like to get up and dance."

They both laughed at that.

He thought how pretty his mother looked in her new coat and hat, and how good Mr. Mann was. And some day he would be earning money, and no one would say "Poor Chan!" to him. He had been afraid to ask the doctor or the nurse when he would be able to go home, but they would

have to unwind him and take this brace off his leg, and then he would have to be in the convalescing room. It would all come around right, now that he had seen his mother. He followed her in the journey home, and saw all the children crowding round her eager to hear. And how Rilla would like her new coat and hat!

"I'll have to come and read you to sleep. And you haven't eaten scarcely any supper," said nurse.

"That's because I'm chock full of delight. There wasn't any room," he laughed.

However, Chan was none the worse.

Little Wilmer was taken to the sunshine room to be with the convalescents. He said "good-by" to Chan in a glad tone, and the boy could not blame him.

"We're going to bring a little boy here who was so delighted to hear you sing yesterday. He has a bad spinal trouble, but we hope sometime he will be better. His father and mother are away in Europe."

"Oh, I'm glad my mother isn't that far off. You know she has to be father, too."

They brought Arthur on his cot, and settled him in the other place. Oh, how white and thin he was! Chan was startled. The nurse arranged

the pillows about him and gave him some milk.

"Would the little boy sing?" he asked in a faint tone.

"I guess so. Chan"—he had asked nurse to call him that so he wouldn't be homesick—"would you mind singing in that low tone?"

"Like the birds," said Arthur. "Not songs with rhyme to them."

"Oh, no," returned Chan cheerfully.

So he sang, and some of the others listened as well. It was very sweet, and he tried to think of what the birds said to each other in the spring mornings.

"That's lovely for headache," said Arthur. "My head doesn't ache as much. Does yours ache often?"

"Oh, no, unless I hit it a hard bump. Nothing about me ached until I hurt my hip."

"How did you do it?"

"Fell out of a tree. Discated something. No, the word's longer'n that. I've left out a part in the middle. But it's getting well, so it doesn't need such a long word. I don't know about the spine, except it's the chain of joints that go down your back. Is yours hurt very much?"

"Oh, there's a big hump between my shoulders, and that can never be taken away. Father thought



“ WOULD THE LITTLE BOY SING ? ” HE ASKED.—*Page 194.*

maybe it might. Oh, will you sing again? The headache is coming back."

"I'll have to sing the same things over. I don't know very much—a few Sunday-school hymns."

"Oh, I like that best because it's like the birds! Our house is in the country, so I've heard them sing. I don't know how you can do it."

"Why, it's just as easy—as talking."

So he sang, and put in little calls and whistles and variations, and when Nurse Jane came she found Arthur asleep.

"Why, Chan, you have charmed him," and she bent over and kissed him. "Chan, you have a well of happiness somewhere about you and it overflows, but you mustn't tax yourself too much."

So Chan lay quiet and thought about his mother and the others, but his mother mostly, and he was so glad she was "dressed up" and looked so pretty. Some women came in to see their invalids who wore very fine clothes and beautiful gold chains, but there was something in his mother's face—he could not make it quite clear to himself—but it was the mother-love that made her different from every one else. Oh, how the time stretched out! Weeks never were so long before, but they *would* come to an end. It was splendid here with the kind nurses, the great rooms, the cleanliness, the

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flowers that came in every day. But there was the suffering, too, only how wonderful it was that little boys could come and be mended. There was a ward of little girls, too, and he had heard that some of them—well, there was heaven. And if you didn't have anybody it would be nice to go there, but there were eight of them and mother, and they could never leave mother.

CHAPTER XII

A SONG IN THE NIGHT

THE two boys were soon great friends. Arthur really seemed to improve. When he told of the handsome house and fine grounds, the conservatory where they had flowers all winter, the two gardeners, the horses and the automobile, the company coming and going and the pictures, the piano and the organ, it seemed very grand. Chan was almost ashamed of their little old house.

"Oh, you wouldn't think us a bit nice!" he exclaimed deprecatingly.

"But I *do* think you are nice," very earnestly, "the nicest boy I ever knew. You know so many funny things and you are all so jolly together, and I like your names. Tip is such a cute name, and his crying without any reason just makes you feel like laughing. And Prim's funny stories, and Marigold! Oh, I wish I could get well enough to come and see you. And your mother who cuddles you all. No one cuddles me except the nurse. The nurses here are so nice. The one I had home

wasn't—well, I think she didn't like me much. And Harry, that's my own brother, is big and strong and goes to boarding-school, and is always talking baseball and riding his pony when he is home. And the new mother's children are little and are kept in the nursery, and she's all for splendid dressing and company. She's handsome, too, and has lots of diamonds that make her glitter. But she never kisses me. Don't you know, some people seem warm and come close to your heart like that man who visits you. He has such a splendid face, just pink and white and round, and that dimple just makes you smile. My father's dark and has a black beard, and I feel almost afraid of him. And the hump on my back——”

“Oh, don't cry!” pleaded Chan. “Our house is poor and old and hasn't nice things in, but if you could come mother'd just love you because of—because you are ill and can't do things like other boys, and Prim will just keep you laughing. And Linn is the greatest fellow to jump and do stunts. Amaryllis is so nice, she's like mother, and the twins will amuse you. You shall have my cot and I'll hop off upstairs. I'll be all well then, and we'll get Mr. Mann to take us out riding, with a lot of things to eat. You won't mind about the—the——” and Chan felt his face burn.

"I sha'n't mind anything if I can be with you and the children. Next summer—maybe father will be home Thanksgiving; they went to Europe in June. That's when he sent me here. I don't know whether I'll go home or not—it's nicer here. And I'll just try to get better. I'm so glad I've found you, Chan. And—next summer!"

"Yes," returned Chan. If they hadn't a fine house, they would make him happy, and Mr. Mann would help.

"You see I have to stay alone so much at home. There you are all so close together. How old are you?"

"About half-past eight, I think."

"And I'm after ten. My birthday is in May, and I always get a lot of things. When I come I'll bring you ever so many of them. Now I'm tired. Oh, I just wish I could hold your hand. Sing a little for me."

"Arthur Collamore certainly is improving," nurse said to the doctor. "Why, he has quite an appetite and the headaches are not as bad."

"That is owing to the anodynes. It is all we can do for him now, and Chan keeps up his spirits. That boy ought to be educated for a doctor. He has a peculiar power, mesmeric, perhaps. It's in his voice and his smile, and the charm about it is

his unconsciousness. But Arthur's heart grows weaker every day. I hope at the last he will just drop out. His father is quite prepared for that, and I don't know as we could pray for him to live. Keep him as happy as you can. Chan is doing splendidly. I suppose Mrs. Firth loves every one of the eight just as she loves him. I wish some one could endow her with a fortune."

They both smiled over that unlikelihood.

Chan did improve rapidly. The doctor took off the bandages and found that everything was all right when he worked the joint gently.

"Oh!" and the boy drew a long, delighted breath. "Can't it stay off! It feels so splendid! And can't you take that thing off my leg? Why do you want to stretch it? You'll get it longer than the other and I'll be a limpy-dick after all!"

The doctor laughed. "You had been making it just the least bit crooked and we want it nice and straight. Now Nurse Mary will come and massage you, and you'll feel made over new. But you'll have to go back in prison again. We can't let you out for good."

Chandler sighed. But the little liberty felt so good, and the consciousness that he would be all well sped joyfully through every vein. And Ar-

thur would have such a nice time with them next summer! They'd make him forget the poverty and the plainness.

"Who is that singing?" Mr. Gwynne said one afternoon, when he had come in to see Dr. Richards on some other business. "Or is it a mocking-bird?"

"It's our bird charming a poor little patient beyond mortal help—just a little child."

"A child capable of that? Can't I go a little nearer? I want to see him."

"If you don't mind the ward. But the worst cases are hidden by the screens."

They stepped in. Mr. Gwynne trod softly, but the sound stopped.

"Oh, have him sing a little more."

Chan knew Arthur had fallen asleep by the breathing, so he had paused.

"Chan," said the doctor, "please sing a little more for me, unless you are tired."

"Oh, no, not a bit. But I wish I knew a real pretty song for you."

"Oh, just that same will do."

Howard Gwynne came a little nearer. Chan's face was not quite in his direction, at least the child did not notice it at first and went on in a kind of careless gladness.

"That is really remarkable. I must know the little fellow."

Chan flushed at first, then smiled and held out his hand.

"Where did you pick up all that? From the birds?"

"I guess so. It isn't any special tune. Birds haven't any note books."

"But who taught you?"

"No one. Marigold, that's my sister, and I try how near we can come to them. I can do the robin best, but she's great on the thrush. But we sing some hymns in Sunday-school. And mother knows a few old songs, but she can't go up on the high notes."

"Well, my boy, your voice has some remarkable capabilities that could be brought out by training, and it ought to be of some service. You can't quite be sure what a voice will be after it changes, but there would be some years—where do you live?"

"Oh, 'way off in a country place."

"What happened to him?" to the doctor.

"A rather bad fall that wasn't attended to, but he will soon be all right. A friend placed him here—a Mr. Mann, who knows all about them, the family I mean. There are eight children, three

younger than this one, all sound, and I guess about as smart as they make them. Poor but honest," smiling.

"And this Mr. Mann! A sort of guardian, I suppose. Can you give me his address? I go out to Chicago at two to-day and have a series of concerts on hand. But I must keep in touch with this boy. I might put something quite worth having in his way. Nice-looking little fellow. Where's the father, and what is he?"

"He has been dead for some years. The mother looks after them all."

"Eight children! Well, she must be remarkable, too. I'm curiously interested. Voices are in my line, you know. Will you give me the guardian's address? I may not see him to-day, but I can write. That voice will haunt me. Good-by, little lad. Get well and strong, and before long I shall hunt you up," and he bowed his adieu.

"What did he want?" Chan asked of the doctor afterward.

"Well, I don't just know. He's a fine man, has to do with music, gives concerts and the like, and might do something nice for you by and by."

"I shouldn't go away with him. If ever I get home, and I feel sometimes as if I could run bare-

foot and alone. I want to see 'em all so much, and I'll never go away again."

"You can't run yet awhile. You'll have to spend two or three weeks upstairs learning to walk. It will be rather queer for you. And I have a good mind to keep you here for my little boy and educate you for a doctor."

"Oh, I must go home, you see. If you had a mother——" Chan winked hard. He did not want to be homesick, but sometimes a great lump came up in his throat, he wanted to see them all so much.

The rubbings went on, and the boy did feel stronger and could sit up quite awhile and read aloud to Arthur, who dozed a good deal. He didn't mind a bit now talking about the little old house and how they all worked and played and embellished the stories they read. "And Primrose lengthens them out in such a funny fashion and makes them do such queer things, and she picks out long, long words that none of us ever heard of. She's a corker at spelling! And when cold evenings come and we can't sit out on the stoop, we crack nuts and roast corn and have just the nicest times. It's 'cause there are so many of us."

"Yes," returned the lonely child.

"Put the screen up here," Arthur said to the nurse one day, "and lean over here, so Chan won't hear. I want to tell you a secret."

Nurse Jane followed his wishes, and then leaned over on the cot, taking the thin hand in hers. It was languid with a weak pulse.

"Do you really think I am going to—to get better?" in a low, tremulous tone.

"Why, the headaches are not so severe." Oh, what else could she say?

"Sometimes I have such queer feelings as if I was floating away, and it's all lovely too, gardens and flowers and singing such as Chan does, only there are voices and voices and crowds of people to love you who seem saying 'Come with us, come with us.' And I think the burden would fall off my back and I'd be straight and nice. Then I *almost* want to go. But I'd like to see all Chan's brothers and sisters next summer. I don't care so much about going to my own home; it's so lonesome."

"Yes," answered the nurse's soft voice.

"Do you know how to make a will?"

"Why—yes, I think so," in surprise.

"I'd like to make one. If I shouldn't go next summer—it's leaving things to people, isn't it?"

"Yes. You write out, or some one does for you, just what you want this or that one to have. But——" "You are too young to make a will," she was about to say, then checked herself.

"Chan's been so nice to me. I love him dearly. I wish I'd always had such a brother, and I want him to have some books. There's my beautiful 'Æsop's Fables' with fine pictures in it, and he has only a little worn-out copy. And 'Hans Christian Andersen,' and 'Water Babies,' and 'Stories from Mythology,' and 'Age of Chivalry.' Will you write them all out? And I may think of some more. Henry has crowds of books and won't want them. I wish I had some money to leave him, but he's such a nice, happy fellow that I think he'll always see the bright side. And I hope he will get well—he surely will, won't he?"

There was such an eager, pathetic light in the eyes that it brought tears to hers.

"Oh, yes. He is really all over his accident, only the joint wants to get firm and strong."

"And you'll write out the will?"

"Yes. Then you must sign it, and I'll sign it for witness."

"Oh, thank you," and a wan little smile lightened his face.

When the doctor made his visit he said to Chan:

"My boy, we are going to move you upstairs to-morrow. You'll have a lot of new friends, boys and girls, and so much to amuse you. Then you must walk around and get back the use of your leg and you will be well. You've been a fine patient and we shall really hate to give you up."

"But I don't want to go," decisively.

"Not out of this ward where every cot is full of suffering? Why, Chan!"

"I want to stay here because—oh, can't Arthur be moved, too? Oh, I can't go and leave him. He's such a lonely little fellow and he has had to suffer so much, and he *is* getting better. Let me stay here another week, please do. I like to sing for him, and we have such nice talks."

"You may stay," the doctor said, in a low tone. And if at the last there came a great agony they would take him to a private room, as they not infrequently did. But he was touched by Chan's devotion.

Arthur did seem to have much less pain, though he was very weak and sat up only five minutes or so at a time; but he was cheerful and enjoyed his singing-bird, as he called Chan, so much. He and Nurse Jane finished and signed the will. Some one sat by him at night, but he slept mostly.

This night Jane came on the watch at twelve. He was marble white and cool.

"I don't believe he will last until morning," said Mary. "He's almost gone now. A blessed release it will be. And his father's junketing around Europe with his gay wife. Well, money doesn't always bring love. Poor little fellow! It will be a heavenly change."

Jane held his cold little hands in hers, but they were never to be warm again. She listened at his heart, but could hear only a faint occasional beat. Then did it stop without a struggle? The little chin quivered downward, the whole frame relaxed. She watched awhile, then she wrapped the small figure, so wasted with pain, in a blanket, and taking it in her arms slipped softly down the broad staircase and laid her burden in the apartment set aside for such purposes. The attendant rose and looked at it gravely. One of the physicians came hurrying in.

"Poor little chap," he said pityingly. "Yet it is best so. I didn't think he would last till this time."

Chan was bright and enjoyed his breakfast. He told Nurse Jane that he could go to the convalescent parlor, but that he had begged to stay another week with Arthur.

"You have made him very happy," she said.

"He must be soundly asleep. I've called to him, but he doesn't answer."

Presently Chan called again. Then he gave a little low whistle. The screen stood between so he could not see. But one of the men came and piled up the blankets and carried away the cot.

"Oh, where have they taken Arthur?" he asked.

"Downstairs," was the brief reply.

The nurse was over opposite and he called to her, putting his inquiry in a startled tone.

She came, and placing her arms about him, hid the frightened face on her breast.

"Chan, dear, he has gone to rest and to the land where there is no more pain and suffering. A month ago they thought he couldn't last but a little while and they were almost afraid to put him over here, but you were such a pleasure to him, and Dr. Richards thought it very sweet of you to ask to stay another week. He just fell asleep, without any pain, I think, while I sat there holding his hands. I hope his own mother will know him in heaven."

Then she kissed him and went away. Chan cried a little, mostly because Arthur's life seemed so sad. That afternoon they took off the brace and stood

him on his feet, and he would have toppled over but for the nurse's arms about him.

"Why, I feel as if I didn't have any legs," with a quavering laugh. "Oh, are you certain sure I'm all right?"

"You'll have to learn some things over again. Now here—put the crutch under your arm and step flat on your foot. You will soon get it right."

Chan thought he still felt very wobbly. They walked him up and down and then put him on the elevator and ushered him into the great sunny room where children were playing and running about in soft felt shoes, sitting in little rocking-chairs, building block houses, and making Noah's animals come out of the ark. A group of little girls were playing tea. None of them was quite sound or well, you could see, but they were very happy.

"This is Miss Jessie, and this, Miss Ellen. I can't be your nurse any more, for I belong downstairs, but you will find them all very nice, and you are to walk as much as you can and go out on the balcony every day," said Nurse Jane.

"You've been so good. Everybody's been good," and he kissed the hand that lay on his shoulder.

Miss Ellen came and talked to him, just a sort

of girl with blue eyes and light hair. She asked him what had been the matter, and they soon were on friendly terms as they kept walking round.

"I'm awfully tired," he said, "and both my legs feel as if they would fall out. Can I sit down?"

"Oh, yes. After you have walked two or three days they won't feel so. Now here are two little girls making furniture. You may like to look at them."

"I have two little sisters at home, twins, and they're past five years old."

"And are you the oldest of the family?"

Chan laughed merrily. "Oh, no, I'm in between. There are eight of us."

"Eight children! What does your mother do when they're sick?"

"They never are sick. Oh, yes, the twins had the measles, but mother said there wasn't hardly enough to go round. They didn't mind it a bit. And maybe Marigold and Primrose will come to see me here. Mother came in the other ward."

"What pretty names! I shall like to see them. Any more sisters?"

"Amaryllis. But she's a big girl. She's a sort of mother to us and keeps house when mother goes out. She's quite tall. She's past fourteen, twice

as old as I am. And isn't it funny that you can never be twice as old as anybody but just once!"

"Why, I had never thought of that," and she smiled. "Tell me about the boys."

By the time he had described them she had a very good idea of the family. Eight children, and no father to look after them! And they couldn't be very well-to-do, she thought.

A group of children were struggling over something, and Ellen had to go to them. Chan watched the little girls. The furniture was stiff paper that they folded into chairs and a bureau and a buffet and tables, and made a furnished room. Then they had dolls that they dressed and undressed even to tiny hats. Chan was enchanted. Then they began to talk. One little girl had been paralyzed on one side, but was getting over it. The other had been badly scarred from burns and one cheek still had a linen band over it. There was quite a confusion of talking and going about and laughing.

Chan liked the supper-time. There was a long table with a bench on each side, and the children sat in a row. They had a bowl of bread and milk and cereal and a rusk with sugar sprinkled over it. The attendants waited on them, washed their hands and faces afterward, and then they returned to the large room and sat in rows down at one end while

one of the nurses read them a story. After that they sang, but Chan didn't know the words and could only say um, um. Then he was rubbed all over and put to bed in a little cot like that downstairs, where he very soon fell asleep.

The next day he was required to walk every little while. The children ran out on the balconies on the sunny side and made lots of noise, and in the afternoon, best of all, Mr. Mann came. They were all well at home, but they wanted him so much.

"I didn't suppose there could be so many sick and hurt children in the world," he said, with a sigh. "And I'm going to be just as good as brand-new, the doctor said. I walked a little way without the crutch this morning. Oh, won't it be gay when I can go home! In two weeks!" and the child's eyes sparkled with delight.

"Then I must bring Goldie and Prim in soon—maybe Saturday."

"Oh! oh!" and Chan clapped his hands. "It's just splendid here!"

That night for a sort of supper dessert, each child had half an orange, the sections pulled apart and sugar sprinkled over them.

"It was your father's treat, Chandler," Miss Jessie said, with a smile. "I hope you love him very much. He is a splendid father."

“ Oh, he isn’t my own father,” and a flush overspread the lad’s face. “ He—he found us last summer and was so good to us, and he planned it for me to come here and be mended. My real father is dead.”

“ Mended ! ” and she gave a quaint nod. “ That is just it, we do try to mend the mishaps. But I think he is more splendid still if he can take such an interest in unfortunate children. You ought to love him a great deal.”

“ Oh, I do. We all do,” he returned, with deep feeling.

He kept thinking of it at night. He was not a bit sleepy. How would it be to have just such a father ! He didn’t want one like Arthur’s, who could go ’way off and leave his little boy to die alone, but to live in that big house and leave the beautiful out of doors and the dogs and some one to take you around and give you clothes and ever so many things you wanted ! Why, it would be like—like—well, there was nothing to compare it with except the fairy stories, and they were not true, more was the pity. And it was like a fairy story, too, that about the picnic and his coming here, and he wondered why Mr. Mann’s wife had not had a houseful of children when he liked them so.

And in the midst of this Chan fell asleep without ever counting the days that must elapse before he could go home. There was a sweet smile on his face as if joy and gladness were following him in the enchanted land of slumber.

CHAPTER XIII

WAS IT A CROWN OR A CROSS?

MARIGOLD and Primrose Firth stood still and stared as they entered the room where the convalescents were playing and resting. Chan was building a high church with a steeple and had his back to the door and his eyes on the little boy who was so eager he kept fidgeting about. Then he heard a voice.

“Oh, Goldie! Oh, Prim!” And he almost toppled over in his eagerness. The church did quite.

“Never mind, Eddy. I’ll build it all over. They’re my sisters, and I haven’t seen them in ever so long.”

“Oh, Chan! And you don’t limp a bit!” Marigold’s eyes were so full of joy that they overflowed with tears.

They made a picture hugging each other, and Miss Jessie wished she had her camera handy to take a snapshot.

“Oh, yes, and next week I’m coming home. Seems to me the awfulest long while, and yet everybody’s been so good, doctors and all. You know I was so afraid they’d be cross, but no one was. And I never felt the hurt—they put you in the loveliest sleep. Oh, and you ought to see Nurse Jane. She puts her arms around you like mother, and they all have such soft voices. Maybe if I was all alone I’d rather stay here——”

“And you’ve grown so white and pretty, Chan. It’s just splendid. I could jump up and down for joy!” cried Prim. “Oh, how many little children are here! Is there something the matter with them all? Why, it’s enough to break one’s heart. And that little girl in the carriage——”

“She never can walk, they think—she’s been paralyzed, and she’s such a sweet little thing. And here’s Miss Ellen.”

Miss Jessie was very glad to see them, and said they had such pretty names.

“I didn’t use to like mine at all,” returned Marigold. “My hair is red and they called me everything at school, saying, ‘Marigold, you’re a scold; you’ll grow sour, cross, and old,’ and I don’t scold. I get mad sometimes. It’s lovely here. It’s ’most like a kindergarten I read about in one of the schoolbooks.”

"I'd like to get down on the floor and play," declared Prim.

"Then come over here and build a church for Eddy. I was putting on the top of the spire when I jumped up and over it went."

She followed Chan. Eddy was disconsolately studying the ruins and at first had a mind to be sulky, but as it went up Prim told him a story about a cat who carried her four babies up into the church loft, and when the bell began to ring she flew at the bell rope but couldn't stop it, and just swung to and fro and caterwauled in a horrid manner until some one came and took pussy and her kittens downstairs.

"What is catter—what you said?" asked the child, eager-eyed.

"Why, it's a horrid noise they sometimes make. They don't like each other very well. And it's funny, but dogs are very sociable and play with each other."

"Tell another story." Eddy kept his eyes on the rising structure, but his ears were wide open. Some other children came, and Prim found herself in business. She didn't like to tell the ridiculous things with long words that she made use of at home, but there was the squirrel that they had tamed and who had a nest in a hollow tree that

had three teeny weeny little squirrels that they used to feed, and the hen they had who used to peck at the door, her way of asking to come in for some bits of bread, and if you didn't let her in she scolded.

"There!" exclaimed Eddy. "Now don't one of you touch it. It's—it's——" he looked at Prim to help him out.

"It's magnificent!" Prim had a way of pronouncing it *magnificent* at home.

"Oh, I wish I could say that!" sighed Eddy.

"Come and build me a house." "No, me for my dolly." "And me," said several voices.

Then she began to tell them about her little sister's dolly. How it had been run over and never was hurt a bit, only so dirty it had to have a new face, and how Laurel wandered off one day to find Chan, and Dolly got lost and it was three days before she was found, and how Tip threw her up in a tree, where she hung head downward ever so long and it never made her dizzy a bit, and how Amaryllis could make her dance just as if she were alive.

Marigold kept close to Mr. Mann and some of the nurses, and was very much interested in hearing what had happened to several of the children. Chan came back to them and slipped his hand in

Mr. Mann's, looking up with such a happy face that it went to the elder's heart.

The hour passed so rapidly that they were surprised when it was time to go.

"When you want to find a position for this little girl," said Miss Jessie, "send her here and she shall be chief entertainer. Out of eight children you might spare us one."

"Oh," sighed Chan, "I don't believe we could spare Prim. She's so funny. And she knits such nice stockings."

They wanted to see the place where Chan had lain in his plaster blanket and his bandages and braces.

"I couldn't turn over, and I had to be fed, and I did get so tired. But it's all right now," and he nodded triumphantly.

There was a new boy in the cot, who had been bruised and banged by a drunken father. His face was strapped and his nose had been broken, as well as one arm. No, Chan wouldn't want that kind of a father, and he squeezed Mr. Mann's hand more tightly.

"And Arthur was over there at the last. When I come home I'll tell you all about him. He was to visit us next summer."

Nurse Jane was glad to see the little girls, and

told them Chan was one of the best patients she ever had.

They let Chan go clear down in the elevator and then he had the ride up again. Oh, in six days he could go home!

"I wish you'd let me learn those songs you sing," he said to Miss Ellen that evening; "I like to sing."

"Why, yes, I shall be glad to," and then they all found that he had a lovely voice.

The children wanted to talk about his sister the next day, and one little girl asked if she was truly a flower.

Then there were five days, four days, three days. Chan could walk just as well as ever.

"I want you to be a little careful," Dr. Richards said. "Don't jump fences, nor climb trees, nor try to beat the boys at stunts until some time next year, and when you are sixteen or eighteen you come here and we will make a first-class doctor of you if the music fellow doesn't come to light. They are not always to be depended upon."

They were sorry to have Chandler Firth go, but now he stood up so straight and strong and had a tint of pink in his cheeks that had filled out considerably.

"You do get so attached to some of them,"

Miss Jessie said to Jane. "I would really like to know about that Firth family and the eight children if these three are any sample. And that child has an exquisite voice. Some of the churches here would make a high bid for him."

So the last day came, and Chan tried very hard to be brave, but he was glad they had asked him to come again as a visitor. They went by trolley and train, and Dan was at the station with the wagon and the robes. Chan could hardly realize that cold weather had come. He was not going to the little old house this night. They would not expect him until to-morrow.

"Why, you certainly have grown," exclaimed Mrs. Alden, "and you are looking so well," pretty, too, she wanted to add, but she knew compliments were not good for children.

"Yes, he's first-class now. And I hope you've brought a good appetite."

But there were so many things he wanted to tell Mrs. Alden about the wonderful Children's Hospital that they sat a long while over the table. When they went through to the library there was a fascinating log-fire on some andirons and beautiful blue and red and yellow blazes chasing each other all around.

Mr. Mann rolled the sofa up nearer.

"Come here, Chan," he began. "I want to talk to you."

He placed his arm about the boy and drew him up close, so his head just fitted in the place between breast and shoulder. He gave him two or three little squeezes that made the child laugh.

"Chan, I want you to be my boy."

"Yes, I'll always be your boy. I love you dearly, better than Dr. Richards, better than anybody."

Yet there was one body he loved better, Mr. Mann knew.

"Yes, I want you for my boy. There are so many of you at home that your mother can spare one—or two, even. I want you to live here, I want to send you to a nice school and educate you, keep you well clothed, and have you taught music and you'll learn to play on the piano. And you shall have a nice room and books and a pony and a little pony carriage that will just hold two, and—oh, I can't think of all the things now. You'll come?"

"Do you mean"—Chan drew a long breath that almost strangled him—"do you mean that I should stay here always—not go home to live, not——"

"Oh, you would go over there often—every day

if you wanted to—and you could take the girls out—they could come over here. But I'd be your father. Chan, I love you dearly. I've always wanted a little boy of my own."

"But—but—mother," and the tremble of tears was in his voice.

A pang went to the man's heart. No, Chan wouldn't be half the boy he was if he didn't care for his mother—"the beautifullest mother." Oh, how could he get round that!

"See here, Chan, I'd like to have a little girl, too. One alone is lonesome. We'll have either Goldie or Prim, and I'll do the same by her. You'll have such nice times. And, Chan, six will be as much as your mother can take care of. Children cost more as they grow older. Oh, I know your mother will consent when we tell her all, and I know you are brave enough to help ease up her lot a little. It isn't as if I were going to take you hundreds of miles away. You will be near them all the time."

Chan crept up and put his arms around the man's neck. "I love you very much," he said, in a rather tremulous tone, "and I know I might have been lame for life but for your goodness. But—mother ought to know——"

"Yes, laddie, I wouldn't urge you without her

consent. But often I'm lonesome in this big house and you will be so crowded in yours presently, and with my money I ought to be doing some good and making some one happy, helping some one along who is having a hard time. You are a brave little fellow, Chan, and I know you will want to help your mother. Now we will talk about other things. I shall always be your friend."

The other things were the happenings at the hospital and the episode of Arthur. And presently he thought the boy ought to go to bed.

After that Mr. Mann took out his memorandum and selected a letter. Dr. Richards had spoken of the man, a musical director and composer, who had attained considerable reputation. In the letter he briefly explained his visit to the institution and what he considered the child's wonderful improvisation, as well as his voice. He had to leave for Chicago and then was summoned to San Francisco, and it was quite possible he might go to London. Would Mr. Mann, who seemed to be the boy's protector, keep oversight of him until his, Mr. Gwynne's, return, when he thought he might be able to do a good deal for his advancement? A voice like that ought not be allowed to sink into obscurity.

So here was some one else who stood ready

perhaps to take the boy he had come to love so well. He could feel the little arms about his neck. He must have something to fill the longing for the children he had hoped to have, and now he could indulge in it. These children were so bright, so upright and honest, their lives had been so simple. What a pleasure such a son would be, growing up to manhood! And a daughter! Oh, he must not let his opportunity slip into other hands.

Chan was very affectionate the next morning, but rather quiet. Mr. Mann sent him over with the factotum, Dan. He was not quite in the mood to see the mother's joy. "I'll be over in the afternoon," he said, with his cheerful smile that comforted the boy's heart.

"It's wonderful to see you so well and spry," said Dan. "And they say there's a lot of children sent there that they do wonders with."

Chan could be eloquent on that point. But how cold it seemed and how everything had changed. The fields were dry and brown, the trees bare, all except some oaks still flaunting their brown red leaves, and the red berries of the bittersweet showing yellow inside where they had burst open. They turned into the lane—oh, there was the little old house more faded and weather-beaten, the garden

with its débris sheltering the turnip bed, the corn shocks where the hens were eagerly foraging.

Prim ran out for something and gave a glad cry, and the next instant they were all there, Chan clasped to his mother's heart. One would almost think he had been raised from the dead by the joy.

Well—the house was poor and mean after the large tidy rooms. It struck a sort of chill to the boy's heart. The smell of some ham boiling on the stove was in the air, the room had not been swept yet, Amaryllis was molding up the bread, Mrs. Firth had been finishing some trousers for Tip and the pieces were strewn around.

"Which leg was it?" asked Tip, first hugging one, then the other.

"Oh, you'll never be able to tell," Chan laughed. "Why, you all seem to be grown and changed, and the twins are no longer babies."

"I tin talk twite plain," announced Laurel, holding her head very high. "An' dolly's made over new, went to hospital."

"Prim, find an empty chair. We're all up in heaps and piles. We didn't expect you until afternoon, then we'd 'a' been in apple-pie order," said his mother.

"I'm going to sit on this stool by you. Oh,

mother, you can't think how glad I am," and he hugged her arm.

"And you can walk with the best of them," Goldie said, her eyes glowing with pride.

"Oh, wasn't it just too splendid!" cried Prim. "I've tried to tell mother everything, but I'm always remembering something new. All those little children playing about. Miss Rush was reading a kindergarten story yesterday and it was like that, only no one was sick. How can they get them so well?"

"There was a room full of sick ones, and don't you remember downstairs in my old ward they were in their cots? And mother," laughing, "Dr. Richards said he was going to make a doctor out of me. Goldie, I think I'd rather have the flower-garden, wouldn't you?"

"Well—that was beautiful. I didn't suppose broken limbs and things could be so—well—so nice."

"Marigold, do finish making the beds and tidying up the chambers. I do want to get this work done."

"And, Prim," said Rilla, "do peel some apples, and I'll make a pie to celebrate Chan's return."

"A pie! Oh goody! I haven't had a mouthful since I went away."

"But you had enough to eat?" inquired his mother anxiously.

"Oh, lots of nice things! And such broths—you could drink them. They weren't one kind of soup with everything in them. And when you were better such delicious little chops and ever so many little dainties and napkins and trays."

"Did it hurt you very much?" asked Tip.

"I suppose the trays and napkins did," appended Prim solemnly.

"I didn't mean them things—his leg," returned Tip, rather crossly. "Granny Keen thought they cut it off."

"She said *maybe* they might," corrected Rilla.

"They had to cut off some little boys' legs, though, that were all mashed up. No, they only pulled mine and pushed it and then put me in plaster, and I had to lie on my back and be fed like a baby."

"What did the plaster do?"

Tip looked up about the ceiling.

"Held me together tight so that I couldn't get out of place. And now one hip is just like the other. Why, where's Linn?"

"He's gone down to the store to-day. Mr. Beers is going to give him a quarter. Sammy Lowndes has gone to the paper mill."

It was odd, but a quarter didn't seem much to Chan.

Marigold finished the bedrooms and opened the doors. It had been very hot and now it suddenly cooled. Chan rose up and looked. Yes, there was his little cot with its faded patchwork quilt, and the other bed. It didn't look like the nice room over at Mr. Mann's, nor the exquisite order at the hospital, and for an instant Chan seemed to shrink in every sensitive nerve.

"Mother, can't you take your work into the bedroom and let me clear up? There'd be just time before dinner, and then we'll look like white folks."

"Can I do anything, Goldie?" the boy asked.

"Help me shake these breadths of carpet. You and Prim catch hold of one end. But my! You've got those nice clothes on——"

"Never mind the clothes."

They took up the breadths of rag carpet and gave them a good shaking out of doors. Marigold swept that part of the room and they laid them down again. Then she and Prim dusted. The kitchen end would be scrubbed by and by. The place was freshened up, and Mrs. Firth announced that the trousers were done. Tip hopped around in delight.

After all, the dinner tasted good. The ham was boiled tender, the potatoes and turnips were mashed together, there were some spiced pickles, and the apple pie, nice and thick and good big pieces. The dishes were a rather odd lot, and only cheap ones in the beginning. Over at Grafton they had beautiful china, of wild rose pattern, and silver knives and forks. But they were very merry and happy. Then Rilla and Prim did the dishes and Marigold scrubbed the floor. After that the children, Tip and the twins were given a nice bath and put in clean clothes.

"Chan," said his mother, "I want to go over to Mrs. Burnham's. I'd like you to go with me. They are counting on seeing you. They've been so interested all the time."

"Yes, I'll be glad to go. Oh, won't they be surprised!"

And surprised they were, sure enough. Mr. Burnham turned him about, looked him all over, and Chan couldn't help being glad he had such a nice new suit for the inspection. Mrs. Burnham wanted to hear how they did it, if the nurses were nice to him, and if he had plenty to eat, and Chan described the wards and the delightful playroom, and said there was an operating room, and another for the very bad cases that suffered dread-

fully and cried. The plaster cast pinched him a good deal and he couldn't stir nor turn over, but Nurse Jane was like his mother.

"Well, you have a great deal to be thankful for, and those children's hospitals are among the best of good works. There is so much done for sick and injured people, and a good deal of real missionary work. I sometimes feel as if I would like to have a hand in it," said the minister.

Katy edged up to him and made friends. She wasn't nearly as rosy as Prim, though the house was ever so much nicer. What did the little girls play? Had they dolls and dishes, and did they visit each other and have little teas?

Chan was quite eloquent about them. But the dark came early now, and Mrs. Firth said they must go.

Chan wondered now and then how he would get his mother told of Mr. Mann's proffer. Some of the children were always around—it was too cold to be playing out-of-doors—and he was a little afraid of Mr. Mann's earnestness if he should be first in the field.

"Mother dear——" there was a desperate sound in his voice.

His arm was around her waist under the good warm shawl that had come in her "fortune."

"Well, Chan," seeing that he stopped there.

"I have something that I want to tell you before—before——"

"Oh, Chan, nothing bad, I hope," for there was a touch of solemnity in the boy's tone.

"I suppose we ought to think it good, but——"

"Well?" in a tone of tender encouragement.

"It's this." His arm hugged her more closely, and his voice had a great tremble in it. "Mr. Mann wants to take me for his little boy to live with him, to go to school, to have a pony and everything nice——"

"Oh, Chan, that is splendid and wonderful!" Her voice rose with joy in every word. "After all that generous time at the hospital! He must care a great deal about you."

Oh, he wanted her to say offhand in the earnestness of a child's heart: "Oh, I couldn't spare you, I couldn't give you away."

"He loves me, yes, he does. Oh, mother, you couldn't give me away!"

"Why, I can't tell all in a minute. It seems so strange—so——"

"I'd have to live there. Of course I could come over and see you, but it couldn't be the same. Some nights at the hospital I cried a teeny little bit to the pillow, I wanted my mother so."

She stooped and kissed the cold little face and gave him a hug, deeply touched.

“Dear, you’d have the love all the same. We shouldn’t forget. I know Mr. Mann wouldn’t want *you* to. There is a great deal to be said about it when you look at all the sides. The education! I couldn’t do anything like that. And the nice clothes, the nice friends you’d grow up with. Oh, Chan! It would be a beautiful life! And with me you would have to go to work presently. And you would all get too big for the little house. Oh, we’ll talk it over and over. It’s so surprising, so unexpected!”

“But, mother, just suppose by and by I should get to like the nice house and the pony and everything better than—like the boy in Linn’s Christmas book——”

“Oh, Chan, I don’t think you could. But you see, by and by you would all go away. Oh, we’ll save it to think over. But it’s splendid in Mr. Mann! It almost makes one cry for joy to find such generous people in the world.”

They caught sight of the light in the window. Mrs. Firth kissed her little son again and found some tears on his cheek. Then they opened the door in the warmth and light, and Chan thought it looked beautiful, so different from the morning,

for it was clean and tidy. The twins were playing "going visiting" in one corner. They had a bench with a white cloth and some broken bits of china. They always had next week's frock and white aprons put on Saturday afternoons. Marigold was darning the last of the stockings, her curly mop brushed until it fairly glistened. Prim, in a gay plaid frock and white apron also, her hair in two pigtails, was laying the table, while Rilla was attending to some hominy she was boiling. And there was a great plate of gingerbread that gave out a savory fragrance. Tip was bright and clean also, and sat on the floor building a great tower of corncobs.

Chan thought he didn't want anything better than the dear old house.

"What did the minister and Mrs. Burnham say, and oh, weren't they surprised?" All the children seemed to talk at once. Tip jumped up and hugged Chan, and Prim said:

"Oh, Chan, you look awful pretty in those clothes, just like a little gentleman."

His mother couldn't have bought anything like them. Linn's and Tip's suits were made of old Aunt Hitty's cast-offs.

"Get a little warm and then let us have supper," said Amaryllis.

So they sat down a merry crew, for there always was something funny to talk over or some conundrum to spring. How the bowls of hominy and milk and slices of bread disappeared! And such generous pieces of cake that many children would have disdained.

The door burst open with a rush.

"Hurray! Hurray!" cried the merry newcomer, with cheeks of roses. He threw down his cap on a chair and hung up his coat on the floor, Prim used to say. "And you can't guess in a month of Sundays!"

Then Linn pirouetted round the sitting-room end of the place and rattled his fingers like castanets.

"Give it up," exclaimed Marigold.

"Another fortune," cried Prim. "Perhaps a barrel of flour. Ours is 'most out."

"And there's a chunk of cheese Mr. Beers gave me. And it's a straight up and down business offer, all on account of my superior abilities! Oh, say, can't I have that piece of gingerbread?"

"Linn, what is the matter?" asked his mother. "Or have you gone crazy?"

"That is the prismatic radiance of an illimitable series of myoplasms, and I've forgotten what they are." He tumbled his cap on the floor, brought

up a chair, pushed Tip a little aside, and sat down by his mother.

"No, you sha'n't!" protested Tip.

"But I've done it and I am the biggest. Some day I'll be the boss of the family, do you hear that, my illustrious compeer? Oh, have a piece of cheese all round, for it was a present. And that reminds me—no, I'll tell *my* story first. Then I've one for Chan. I've had a business offer, as I said——"

"You may get to it by Monday morning," laughed Prim.

"It's a situation in Mr. Beers's store and real money wages."

"Oh, Linn!" exclaimed his mother, bending over to kiss him.

"Yes. Mr. Beers likes me a good deal," though Linn blushed in the confession. "I can figure first-rate and Sammy did get things in a muddle. So he said if I'd come in the store and do my best he'd give me three dollars a week, though he thought it would be too far to walk night and morning and in stormy weather, so I could come down Monday morning and stay until Saturday night, and he'd give me a dollar seventy-five, then, and take the rest for board. And that would be seven fifty a month—well, a little over. Just as

soon as it came pleasant—say April—I'd come home, and that would be twelve dollars a month. Just think of it!"

"Whatever will you do with so much money?" asked Marigold.

"Put it in the bank," subjoined Prim.

"Get the new barrel of flour," said Rilla.

"Oh, Linn, that's wonderful!" said his mother. "The Lord is sending us something all the time. You know I didn't want to go to the funeral one bit, and my old bonnet was so out of date. And I didn't think much of the old things, but see how useful they've been. And there was the five dollars, and Chan's getting well, and my new coat and hat, and now this! Why, it is just like a fairy story!"

"Well, mommy, don't cry!" and Linn kissed her. "We'll just have a glorification. And if the fairies or the brownies want to do anything more for us just let them send it along. Oh, yes, it isn't done coming. Chan, there is a beautiful clean box at the store for you, none of the old second-hand grocery boxes of starch or cereal or soap or X-ray stove polish. Came in the train this afternoon, but no one was coming up this way, and it was too big for me to shoulder. You'll get it on Monday. It's from some place in New York State."

"A box for me!" ejaculated Chan, in surprise. "Not from the city, is it? For of course anything from Mr. Mann wouldn't come that way."

"Took two expresses to bring it, at that. I'm 'most sorry I spoke of it, for now we'll be wondering all the time."

"It's very queer," continued Chan reflectively. It was not from the hospital, and if Dr. Richards had remembered him out of all the little patients, many worse off than he, that would have gone to Mr. Mann. "Oh, to wait until Monday!"

The table was cleared away and they all retired to the sitting-room part. Chan and Tip brought benches on each side of their mother and laid their heads in her lap. The twins went to bed. Amaryllis dropped down on the sofa, she was always tired out when Saturday night came. Prim was knitting a mitten. Marigold, deep in a book, thought they could all talk about Linn's going to business, but his mother considered him too young to give up school.

"I'll take some books down and study a bit about the things I want. There's a good deal I don't care for and isn't going to help me a bit. I can't draw worth a cent, so why should I hammer away at that, and as for language, as they call it,

I can't make out beginning or end. I'll learn more in the store."

"I'll surely have to stay home," thought Chan. "There will be wood to split and the chickens to look after and snow to clean. Oh, no, I couldn't be spared."

CHAPTER XIV

CHAN'S LEGACY

SUNDAY was fine and not very cold. All the six children started for Sunday-school. The twins, as usual, sat in a corner and played. Mrs. Firth was reading through the Bible, but she found very little time even on Sunday, and she was wondering somewhat; but she need not have done so, for she heard the trot of Bonnie and went to the door. There was Mr. Mann, fresh, rosy, and smiling.

"I'll tie her here out of the wind and she'll get the sunset. I'll blanket her well, too. Pity you hadn't a little barn."

"We never had a horse, so the shed answers every purpose but that——"

"And I hope you are all well. The boy was glad enough to get back to you, I suppose. He's been a brave and lovely little chap through it all, and I'm so glad he could be thoroughly mended, as he calls it."

Then he came in. The twins were too much engrossed to remark his advent, so he seated himself in a familiar fashion.

"It is all owing to you"—and her voice had an exquisite little falter in it. It was always sweet and had no rasping notes in it. He thought she could never have scolded much, which was true enough.

"Yes, they were all wild with joy," she went on. He never seemed to care about being thanked, but one *must* be grateful. "And he has really grown in this little while. They were so proud to take him to Sunday-school."

"It would be worth seeing," with an approving nod.

She knew he had come to talk about taking Chan, but she was not quite ready. Of course he *must* go. They could not be so ungrateful.

"Something has happened that I'd like to ask your advice about," she began. "It is Linn this time. You know the old store down by the station, Mr. Beers's? It is the only store in Denby, and he would like Linn as a sort of clerk. It wouldn't be hard"—with a vague smile. "He wants to go."

"And Linn is how old?"

"He will be thirteen pretty soon."

"That's rather young to start in business. He ought to have more schooling. What sort of a scholar is he?"

“He doesn’t seem to like school as well this fall. They set him about tasks that he doesn’t take real interest in. He’s good at figures, but he dislikes those queer puzzle things they give out. He likes history and geography, especially that part about what is raised in different countries and bought and sold. And I’ve taught them all to spell. Tip’s the worst, but he’s such a little fellow. Studies are so different from what they were when I taught. But it seems to me poor people ought to learn what will fit them for the life they have to lead.”

“Right you are; but education is a great advantage nowadays when we are finding out wonderful things about the world we live in. I never had much schooling as a boy, and when I went into the factory I found there were lots of things that would advance me, and I went at them tooth and nail, as the saying is. It was hard work. Now there are splendid evening schools and libraries, though they haven’t spread so much about the country places, and Denby is way behind the times. But Linn wants to go, you say?”

“Yes—he is kind of tired of school, and he will have to go to some kind of business soon—there are so many of them. But I would like him to have more schooling,” and she sighed.

Eight little ones to care for and educate. How was she going to do it?

"He thinks he can study down there at the store. You know there isn't very much business, especially in the winter. And he can drive quite well. But I didn't feel that I wanted to turn any of them out quite so young. He was at Squire Briggs's most of the summer, but that was a good deal waiting on Mrs. Briggs."

"But the long walk back and forth——"

Mrs. Firth explained how that would be obviated. "And he can come home early on Saturday, so we can have him all day Sunday."

Mr. Mann considered. If he had not known about the straits and pinches of poverty, the making one dollar do the work of two or three, he could not have understood the case so well.

"You see, in the cities now there is a law against children's going into any employment until they are fourteen. I don't know that it obtains around here. That's plenty soon enough, but in this case, well, you might let him go for a while. He may get tired of it and go back to school of his own accord. There are always a lot of old codgers sitting around a country store whose conversation isn't very improving. But you'll keep watch over him, and a bright, cheerful home influ-

ence counteracts other mischief. Yes, I think you might let him go."

"I'm thankful for your interest," she returned, in a grateful tone.

"There's something else I came to talk about," he said presently.

Oh, that was Chan. She braced herself.

"I want to give a party," he began, "a real jolly Thanksgiving party. I never had one in my life. You see, my wife didn't like the trouble, and then I don't know that we had any friends to ask," with a ghost of a laugh. "But now I have a nice big house and can spend money with a clear conscience, and it seems to me I ought to do something besides pamper myself."

"Oh, you do, you do!" she interrupted. "You are always—you have been so good to us, and we had no claim and could do nothing in return."

Was she quite sure? She could give him Chan!

"Well, I've come to ask you to do something. I dare say you'd have some kind of a merry Thanksgiving at home, but I want you all to come over and make merry with me. It wouldn't be much fun for me to sit alone and carve a fine turkey and eat what I wanted. There'd be such a lot of it left, and this is the season when good cheer should be going round the world."

She looked up at him with such startled eyes he had a mind to laugh.

“What? Not all of us!”

“Well, we might leave out Amaryllis. She gets left out of a good many things, I fancy, and I shouldn’t like it at all. Yes, *all* of you. That would be only nine, and I’m asked out to a business men’s dinner where there are to be twenty-five plates. They’ll tell some sharp stories and some broad stories, and a number of them will drink themselves silly and coarse, which I can’t abide. And I won’t have half that number.”

“But think of the work for your housekeeper, and you’re not used to such a crowd of children.”

“Well, I’d like to get used to them. I’m tired of living so much alone. What is all the prosperity good for if you can’t share it? Mrs. Alden is willing. Dan is going to get a woman to come and cook on Wednesday and clear up on Thursday. I’ll send over in the morning. I see there’s a big sleigh in the carriage-house, and I’ve been dicker-ing for another horse to match Bonnie; she’s a beauty, too. So I’ll have a big turnout. I want to enjoy the things I’ve never had before, now that they’ve come in my way. Oh, you can’t say ‘no’ to me!”

He laughed softly, yet with a delicious sort of merriment that altogether disarmed her.

"I don't know what to say"—and she flushed scarlet. How pretty and girlish she looked.

"There's only one thing to say, that you will all come. It will be my house-warming. Somehow I haven't neighbored much at Grafton. They seem—well, they are the old settlers and have card clubs, and I don't play. The men have a nice bowling club, and if I thought I was not too old I'd join that."

"Old!" she re-echoed with a soft laugh and, he thought, a sound of resentment.

"Well, I suppose five-and-forty isn't the extreme limit. I haven't needed glasses yet and I am not getting bald, and I think I'm not too old to have some good times. But I had better be quick about them. Oh, there come the children! We'll see how many of them will decline."

Prim sprang forward and caught both hands. Tip, with a push, gained possession of one, and they all settled around him. Even the twins came out of the corner, and Laurel said, "Me, too," looking eagerly about.

When there was a moment of quiet he gave his invitation. The children looked at their mother in a silence that was positively funny.

"See here," he began, in a tone of assumed surprise. "Your mother's coming to my Thanksgiving dinner, and if you don't want to——"

"Oh, we do! we do!" cried the chorus of voices. "Mommy, you wouldn't go without us?"

"Then it is a settled thing. Thursday morning I shall send over for you, and if one dare to stay at home he or she will be crossed off my books. I won't even send him a turkey's leg. Linn, I hear you aspire to business. Be sure to come home Wednesday night. Chan, little lad——" and he gave the boy a fond squeeze.

"Yes," returned Linn, with a boy's pride. "I'm going with Mr. Beers."

"Keep up to the straight mark. Now I must go, for Bonnie has stood long enough in the cold. I think it will snow in a day or two, so we'll have some sleigh-riding."

"Oh, goody! goody!" cried Prim. "And riding down hill!"

They all went out to see him off, and Marigold brought a lump of sugar for Bonnie, who fairly laughed out of her large dark eyes.

"Children," their mother said gravely, when they were all back again, "I want you to be very careful and not say a word at school about our

going. I'm quite sure Mr. Mann would not like it. See how well you can keep a secret."

They promised over and over again.

"Did he talk about—about me?" inquired Chan later on, with a little quiver in his lip.

"No, dear. I think he means us to consider well—there isn't any real hurry."

"But, you see, you'd want me if Linn was in the store, and I'm so strong now I can help a good deal. He mustn't do everything for me."

Mrs. Firth was up quite early. It had just begun to snow. Rilla took breakfast with them.

"Don't let Tip go to school to-day," the mother said. "The wind is east, and I think it will be a bitter storm."

"Oh, mother, *must* you go?" asked the girl protestingly.

"Yes, dear. I have just to-day and to-morrow out, and that means only two dollars this week. Keep things straight and don't let the twins run out in the cold."

The mother and son walked off together, as Linn had to pass Mrs. Boyer's house. The snow was fine and cutting. They said a tender good-by, and the boy went on steadily, feeling glad and proud to be of some assistance.

By degrees the children were dressed and had

their breakfast. Tip consented readily to staying at home, he was not as eager for school as either of the girls, and Chan had not started yet. The chickens were fed, the snow swept away from around the door. Chan was impatient for his box and tried to while away the time by various expedients.

School was dismissed after the first session. Some one hailed the girls, though they could hardly see through the blinding snow.

"Jump in," called out Farmer Bird. "Your mother must have been crazy to let you out in such a storm. I'm going right past your house with a box. Now 'f 'twas Christmas this might be a Santa Claus box."

"Oh, it's for Chan!" cried Marigold, delighted. "Linn told us about it. Thank you over and over again for the ride."

"We'll have the snow of the season. You'll see. To-morrow morning it will be over the tops of the houses."

"Over the tops," repeated Marigold. "Who'll dig us out?" Then she bethought herself and echoed the farmer's hearty laugh.

Chan saw the wagon stop and ran out. The girls jumped down, Prim with the joyful cry, "Oh, your box has come."

"I'll have to lift it out, seein' it's ruther heavy for a little chap of your size. Beats all how well and spry you've grown. Full of gold, I dare say!" with another loud laugh.

He carried it in, and told them they were welcome to anything he could do and went on his way.

There it was, a fresh, nice box, directed to "Master Chandler Firth," express paid. Amaryl-lis worked carefully so as not to break the cover. On the top there lay a letter with the same superscription.

"Oh, it's books," said Chan. "You unpack them while I read the letter."

"To my son Arthur's little friend, Chandler Firth," he began.

"And here's something else. Why, it's—it's——"

"It's a will," said Marigold; "but read the letter."

"When I went to the hospital on my return and saw the nurse who had so kindly cared for my little boy and who told me how happy you had made his last sad days, she gave me this little will she had written out for him that afforded him great satisfaction. When we went away the doctor gave us no hope of his recovery, but thought he might last the year out. We knew he would

be better cared for at the Institution than left in charge of a nurse at home, so we sent him there. Everything was done for him, I am sure, and I thought the nurse a most kind and tender person. We brought the little body home and buried it beside his mother. I cannot express all the gratitude I feel that you should have given him so much pleasure and relieved hours of suffering. I send to you the books he wished, and have added others of his to them and two pictures that he always admired so much, the Madonna and the Saint Christopher. And I wish you to accept from me a little watch that was sent to Arthur when he was nine years old, as a token of regard from me, and my sincere appreciation. The nurse told me a great deal about you, and I am thankful you recovered so thoroughly. If in the years to come I should be able to do anything for you, in a business way, you have only to send this card to me and I shall be glad to return the kindness. Most sincerely yours,

“ARTHUR JARVIS COLLAMORE.”

Chan had to stop several times and cry a little. Now he handed it over to Amaryllis.

“And I thought I shouldn’t like Arthur’s father a bit. It seemed so dreadful for him and the step-mother to go off traveling and leave him to die alone. But everything was so nice there and the nurses were so good, I do suppose it was better. It’s such a lovely letter. Read it, Rilla. And oh, look at the books!”

They were beautifully bound, and in those mentioned in the little will Mr. Collamore had written Chandler's name just under his son's. There were two very fine books of engravings, indeed the beginning of a truly valuable boy's library. The pictures were securely packed, and were exquisite photogravures.

"But I wonder who St. Christopher was?" and Chan looked at Rilla as if she must know everything.

"There's a book in the Sunday-school library about him, I believe," returned Amaryllis thoughtfully. "I'll see if I can find it."

"Oh, Lal dear, don't touch my pretty books; you'll muss them," and Chan took it out of his sister's hands, who cried, of course.

"You'll have to put them away, dear," said Rilla, in a soft tone, "and keep them in the box. They'll be so nice for you when you are older. And sometime you may have a pretty room and a bookcase. Perhaps something nice may happen to us when we are grown up and can earn some money."

Chan thought of the delightful room awaiting him, where he could have the bookcase and a pretty willow easy-chair and ever so many things, and a charming home with a real father—yes, Mr. Mann

would be that. The boy swallowed over a big lump in his throat.

Rilla dropped down on the floor and helped him put them back in their paper wrappings.

"Why, see here, Chan," and her face was alight with sudden joy, "when you are old enough to go to some nice business, this Mr. Collamore may find a place to put you in, a bank, maybe. You'll be nice-looking and you must study most of the high-up things. Oh, wouldn't it be wonderful, like some of the boys we read about in stories!"

Laurel was heartbroken because she couldn't have the "pitty books," but Prim caught her up and began to tell her a story.

"I wish we'd told mother to stay all night," Rilla said. "We wouldn't have been afraid without her and Linn. Chan, you go and feed the chickens, and Marigold might go and help you sweep snow."

Marigold liked nothing better. Suddenly it stopped snowing and there came a streak of yellow light in the west. Oh, how beautiful the world looked. Rilla put on a great saucepan of potatoes, and made a spiced johnny-cake. Fred Boyer brought her mother home on his big sled, though they had quite insisted she should remain all night.

The simple supper tasted very good to the hun-

gry crowd, though Chan was much too full of emotion to do it justice. The story had to be told over, but the letter she must read herself.

"Chan dear," she said, with grave tenderness, "some of the things that seem very little in the doing bring one a sweet reward; the sweeter when you don't expect any. It's splendid to have such a lot of books, and I wish you could have a room all to yourself."

"When we get a little richer we might raise the roof and make some nice rooms upstairs. Yes, that's what we will do. We'll keep that steadily in our minds and pray and pray. Mr. Burnham said you did get the things you prayed for, even when sometimes they were not best for you."

The mother sighed softly. She had done a good deal of praying in her day. But they were all well, and the miracle had happened to Chan.

They were so engrossed with the books and the letter that they quite forgot about Thanksgiving.

It was clear and bright the next day, but cold. Amaryllis washed and ironed the twins' white aprons and basted a bit of ruffling in the necks of their stuff dresses that had been exhumed from the rummage bundle. She thought she could find use for everything but the two old silk frocks, and

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they would fall to pieces when you shook them out.

Linn came home quite early Wednesday night, and Mrs. Beers had given him a nice mince pie, "though you'll have to cut it small to make it go round," she said laughingly. There had been another light fall of snow, and as the ground had been frozen underneath, it made very good sleighing. He was in fine spirits, business had been good, everybody was full of Thanksgiving preparations.

"I thought we'd kill the two old speckled hens," Mrs. Firth said, "and have a nice pot-pie, but we'll save it over for Sunday dinner. Oh, children, I do hope you will behave nicely and not run wild."

"We'll be good, gooder, goodest, won't we, Tip?" cried Prim, and he nodded.

Of course Linn had been very eager to know what was in the box, "and we will look them all over on Sunday. What a splendid present! Oh, Chan, I'm so glad it wasn't you that died. I want us all to grow up to be men and women, and we won't stay in this old two-cent town, but go somewhere where we can have just royal times, and mother shall not work as she does now." And then they hugged each other.

CHAPTER XV

MR. MANN'S THANKSGIVING PARTY

MR. MANN had been extremely busy and somehow curiously happy. The snow in the city had only amounted to slush. He had gone to see about his new purchase and decided Lady Betty was a bargain, so had concluded it and ordered her sent at once. Business had been very good during the fall, plenty of orders, willing workmen, prompt payment of bills. Last year he had given a turkey all round for the first time in his business career. He must not fail now when everything had prospered with him. There was this to look after, there were stores to send out home, there were dinners for several poor organizations to help out. The Rosses were to go to a country wedding of some relative, so even if he had counted on them they would have failed him.

Oh, how beautiful the world about Grafton looked when he stepped out of the station! The far reaches of snowy loveliness with the background of forest, many of the trees evergreens; the houses with their hooded peaks, the long level

of yellow light, the aspect of softness, silence, cleanliness, touched him like going into a new world, throbbed in every pulse with a joy he was content to feel but could not translate.

“Did she come, Dan?”

“About an hour ago,” touching his hat. “She’s a beauty, sir. I don’t know but she’ll outshine Bonnie when she’s had as good care. She isn’t quite up to the mark.”

“She’s broken to the saddle. I think I will ride when pleasant weather comes if I am not too old and awkward. When I was a boy I rode bare-back; my only experience,” and he laughed.

Was that little boy really himself? Was the other one bumming around, going hungry and sleeping anywhere, the present Adonijah Mann? Ah, he did owe a good deal to his kind when he had been so prospered. But country life *was* better for children.

And the warm, cheerful home, how enjoyable it was! And when it came to have the little lad who would run to welcome him, the shining eyes with their gladness, the small hands slipped in his—the boy growing taller, wiser, and sweeter every year, almost like one of his own blood! He read his paper perfunctorily, so engrossed was he with his dream.

"I'd like to go on Wednesday noon," said Mr. Ross. "With children one doesn't enjoy being late, and I suppose every train will be crowded."

"Very well. I'll see to the last things and take the gratitude," he laughed, though he almost desired to be at home Wednesday.

"When that woman comes you must make her earn her salt," and there was a twinkle in Mr. Mann's eye. "Have two of the turkeys cooked so you can just heat them over. I don't want you to be in the kitchen all the time on Thursday."

"I do believe you could cook a turkey and get a dinner yourself," said Mrs. Alden.

"I cooked the last one we had," he returned, a little gravely. "Last Thanksgiving I had neither home nor wife."

He recalled her words: "If you want a grand turkey dinner you'll have to cook it yourself. I'm too busy to bother with it."

Oh, if she had only taken a little of the sweetness of life as she had gone along! His heart ached for her even in the grave.

The woman had come, a tall, strong, rather gaunt person answering to the name of Lide. She was a good worker, took hold in real earnest and did not waste her time talking.

As for him, he dealt out gifts and good wishes.

He was pervaded by a holiday spirit. All the time he was learning of the delight a man could do and get by studying his fellow-creatures a little. Some gave him merely a gruff "Thank you," others a cheerful smile with it. One sad-looking fellow had to clear his throat before he spoke.

"I hope nothing is amiss?" said the employer kindly.

"Two sick children," was the brief reply.

He squeezed a bill into the man's hand. Yes, there were sorrows and cares that he had not known, hard as he had thought his life at times.

But when the train halted at Grafton he was struck anew by the wonderful beauty. There was nothing to mar the appearance of the station, no business débris. Two snow-covered pyramids that would be abloom all summer, a straight street, a winding road at one side, and the rows of avenues with their artistic houses. Then long stretches of unbroken snow, the rise of ground that was covered with trees of various kinds, graceful evergreens among them. And that long band of yellow light was almost like the last of a sunset, though the clouds above were gray.

Everything was right. Mrs. Alden was well pleased with her handmaiden, and there was an appetizing dinner for him.

"But you've sent enough things for a feast," she said, "and there are no poor people about here." Poverty in the country seldom means starvation.

"Well, you can let Dan take home a basket of the overflow," laughing.

She was so trim and nice and cheerful, this neat housekeeper who always seemed to know the right thing to do and do it without fussing. Mrs. Ross did fuss a little. A crook somewhere or an article in the wrong place disturbed her. Perhaps it was the care of young children. But there was the host over in the little old house that didn't seem to cause much worry. They played and laughed, disputed and made up, sometimes slapped each other, at least Rhoda was quite free in administering authority to her twin, but Laurel's arms were so short and fat that Rhoda could dodge easily. No one seemed to note childish controversies until voices rose very high, then mother or Rilla said, "Children, children!" and there came a calm on the sea of trouble. How did they get along so? he wondered.

Latterly the idea of marrying again had entered his mind. It was foolish at five-and-forty, perhaps, but he thought he would like to be loved and cared for, have some one to kiss him when he

went away and watch for his coming, and Mrs. Alden *almost* filled the bill. If there were some little children!

He took the thought with him to the library, where he stirred the fire and lighted his cigar. Of course sometime he would have his little boy. He felt now that it was best not to be in too great a hurry, but let them all get familiar with the idea. He would have the others over one or two at a time. But there ought to be some tender, womanly heart to mother Chan when he came. Little Chan with the beautiful voice scarcely any one was aware of. It must be worth something if Mr. Gwynne wanted to take it in hand.

His cigar went out and he fell into a half-doze. A woman came and clasped her soft hands under his chin, laid her warm cheek against his—his wife—the wife of some of the stories he had read. Well—he could count on a quarter of a century before real old age, and he would have her to travel down the decline with. Chan for a son, but he could not decide whether the daughter should be Prim or Marigold.

There was another light fall of snow in the night, but the morning was fine. The east was all aflame with summer-time radiance. The sky was a peerless blue with here and there a white drift

sailing over it. Every twig was outlined and shone as if crested with diamonds. It was good to be alive, Adonijah Mann thought, and he uttered a reverent Thanksgiving.

"Dan," he exclaimed after breakfast, "pile the sleigh up with blankets and things and bring over every soul, if you have to pack the twins on the sleigh bottom. Otherwise you will have to go over again. Mind, now."

The horses came down the drive jingling the silvery bells; Lady Betty was the least bit arrogant and held her head high. What a pretty team they were!

Really the avenue was in a sort of gala procession. Ridgewood people liked this road, it was so wide, straight, and smooth. Gay loads in fine array passed and repassed. One stopped at the Chedisters' and let out a stylish party.

"So they are going to keep Thanksgiving, too!" Mr. Mann said to himself.

Everything seemed to fly past. How he hoped nothing had happened!

There was great flurrying and scurrying in the little old house. The children had been scrubbed the night before, but if Amaryllis couldn't put the ethics of dust in as exquisite language as Ruskin,

she fought it in a way that would have appalled him. She dressed the twins and placed them on a chair and told them if they stirred they would be left at home, which she didn't quite mean, of course, and they looked at each other with big eyes and quivering lips.

Linn brought in a great pile of wood and some splendid kindlings, so they could start the fire at night, and he put a big log in the stove so it would last some hours. Then they heard the jingling of the merriest bells.

"Well, if that isn't supersplacious, and magnificently grand!" declared Marigold. "Oh, why don't we live down in the village and set everybody wild with envy! Another beautiful horse and a sleigh like Noah's ark! Look, Chan, look!"

Mrs. Firth had not been quite sure they would all go. Now she meekly gave Dan his way. There never had been anything like that ride in their lives.

"I feel as if I wanted to sing, 'On a Christmas morning,'" declared Marigold. "Why, isn't it Christmasy and fine? I know we sha'n't have as gay a time at Christmas."

"Maybe we'll all go over there again," subjoined Chan hopefully.

"Oh, children, I hope you won't act as if you

had just come out of the woods," said their mother.

"They're ob-ster-epper-epperous," declared Tip.

"I should have put in two more syllables," remarked Prim.

They huddled up together and their laughter made echoes on the frosty air.

One of the guests was standing in Mrs. Chedister's bay window, and called to her.

"Oh, Emily, come and look at this load of children! Six, seven, eight. Do you suppose they are Institution young ones? They're in hoods and motley array. And there's a woman. Who lives next door?"

Gladys came with a quickened step. Now they were laughing as they ran up the walk.

"Well, there *is* a raft of them!" replied Mrs. Chedister. "A Mr. Mann who is——"

"What a beautifully matched team! Has he plenty of money?"

"I should think so. The Gedneys were in trouble and the place had to be sold. He's a widower, Grace," laughing.

"Can't we make some excuse to go in? Does he have these parties often?"

"There were some children there in the summer,

you know, mamma," interposed Gladys. "And they had such a good time."

"Good time! I thought they would tear things to pieces. They were Irish, I guess, and one had red hair."

"Well, I suppose they don't belong to him," said Miss Grace Lawton.

"They" were getting out of wraps upstairs in one of the rooms and came down in a sort of string, the twins bashfully hanging back. Rilla said you had to coax them to come to you and then coax them to stay away. And oh, how they had been scrubbed and scoured and rinsed until they shone painfully! Rilla didn't know about talcum powder taking the shine off, and hadn't any if she had known. Those finger nails had been a task of long-suffering and patience.

But somehow they were in a huddle about Mr. Mann, their nicely brushed heads being tousled, and they nearly all talked at once while he kissed here and there and said, "Have I been all around? Hadn't I better go again for fear I've missed somebody?"

Oh, Miss Lawton, what would you have said to that!

"I 'ant to put a tiss in the hole in your cheek," exclaimed Laurel, with infinite pains.

"So you may." He lifted her up. How sweet and soft all the young lips were. That was the joy fathers had.

"I don't see how you came to have such a dimple," Marigold began complainingly. "Men don't need them. I wish I had it. Lal, take it out and give it to me."

Laurel put her small thumb and finger to the place and drew a long breath.

"I tan't det it out."

"Oh, Marigold!" said her mother, with a pink flush in her face that should have belonged to the girl.

He sat down with the child on his knee.

"I'm afraid it won't come out," and he shook his head. "It's warranted to wash, even. I don't know why it should have come there. I wish I could give it to you, Marigold. I've wanted it out many a time. I've heard of people having dimples made."

"Punched in, I suppose! It must hurt a good deal. I don't like to be hurt."

"Let them give you ether," said Chan, slipping under Mr. Mann's other arm. "My box came. It was from little Arthur's father. It seems odd that he should always be little to me when he was older. And the most beautiful books and two

pictures. He willed them to me. Nurse Jane wrote his will and it was all signed right. And such a lovely letter—we all cried over it. I've brought it along."

"It is just splendid," added Marigold. "And he said such nice things to Chan. I'm so glad he could sing for the poor little fellow."

Would some one else covet the voice?

He put Laurel down. "Let's go and read it, Chan. We'll be back in a moment or two."

He took Chan over in the corner of the library. It made his man's eyes moist to see the crooked, trembling signature to which Arthur had added "with my love." And Mr. Collamore's letter touched his heart as well.

"But you're my boy, Chan; you'll belong to me always," and the strong arm tightened its grasp. "You'll never need to ask favors of any one. But it was very kind in Mr. Collamore, and I am glad he cared so much about his poor motherless boy. Oh, Chan, some day you will know how dear you have grown to me."

"The dinner is ready," announced Mrs. Alden.

Then they were all marshaled out and seated in due order. Mrs. Alden and Mr. Mann were on opposite sides of the table, Mrs. Firth on one end



THEY WERE ALL MARSHALED OUT AND SEATED IN DUE ORDER.

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with a twin on each side, Amaryllis at the other end. Mr. Mann had Chan on his right hand and Linn on the left; Mrs. Alden had Tip on her right and the others sandwiched between. Mr. Mann had never said grace at his table before, but somehow he had been very full of gratitude of late and he asked a blessing now in a clear, manly tone.

Oh, how nice they looked, if their clothes were not in the latest style! Rilla had made some neckties out of pieces of the old silk gowns that were not so much faded. Their collars were all clean as well as their hands, and they sat up straight, as their mother had tried to impress upon them. And oh, what a turkey that was! What elegant cranberry sauce and golden lemon jelly, crisp celery, and onions in cream gravy. Mr. Mann carved, Lide helped to vegetables that were on a side table, Mrs. Alden to the others. It was funny, but at first they obeyed their mother's mandate to the letter.

"Have you all left your tongues behind you?" asked their host.

"Will Bo-Peep have to be sent after them?" inquired Prim.

"Mr. Mann, which side of the turkey is eaten first?" propounded Marigold.

"Why—it depends on which side you carve first."

"No, it doesn't depend upon that at all."

"Well, suppose I turn mine over," and he suited the action to the word. "Now, Miss Marigold!"

"And that doesn't answer the question."

"Like the boy's riddle they snap on you, there isn't any answer to it."

There was a mirthful twinkle in Linn's eye.

"I wouldn't be so foolish as to ask a question that couldn't be answered," returned Marigold, with a fine air of dignity.

"You'll find a great many of such questions in the world. Now, Miss Marigold, answer mine. Which side of the turkey—why," and he glanced up puzzled—"how was it? There was a catch somewhere—which side of the turkey——"

There was a merry shout.

"Is eaten first," prompted Chan, leaning over.

"Is eaten first?" triumphantly.

"Why, the right, always. The other is *left*," returned Marigold, with the grace of innocence. "You see, it doesn't matter which way you turn the turkey."

"But suppose there isn't any left?"

"I've answered the one question."

"I'll look up something to catch you. Have you any more of these things?"

"On which side of the church do they *always* plant the yew-tree in England?" asked Linn.

"Why—on the right side."

Linn shook his head.

"On the left, then."

Another shake.

"Then they don't plant it at all."

"Why, they plant it on the outside," said Tip, giving it away. "I know that."

"I know it too, now," said Mr. Mann, with a droll smile.

"Children," and their mother's voice was reproving, "it isn't nice to bother Mr. Mann with your silliness. You see, they are so little with grown-up people," apologetically.

"It makes a bit of fun and brightens one's wits. I'm a rather stupid old fellow."

"You're not old at all," resented Prim.

He bowed and said "Thank you." Prim wondered what it was for.

They went on being merry and eating. There was no left side to the turkey, and slices of the other were brought on. Then Lide cleared the table. There was a small piece of mince pie, a

great beautiful preserved peach, and nuts galore, almonds and English walnuts, which were a treat. Then Marigold, seized with a remembrance of something she had read only a little while before, rose and held up her glass of fresh water, exclaiming:

“Here’s to your health, Mr. Mann, and”—what came next?—“and may the best of everything come to you.”

That was good, but it wasn’t quite as elegant as the real toast, and she sat down with a flushed face.

He rose. “Thank you most sincerely, my child. And here’s wishing we may all be together next Thanksgiving. You must all say ‘Amen’ to that.”

They all said it reverently. Mr. Mann led the way to the library, and as Marigold entered he bent over and kissed her.

It was growing a little dusky; the big tree at this corner of the house shut out some of the light. Then, too, the woods hid the westward sun. Mr. Mann stirred up the fire and made a brilliant blaze.

“Oh, let’s sit on the floor and watch it!” cried Prim. “It’s always so comfortable. You want to slip off the chairs. They seem made especially for grown-up people. When I am rich I shall have

a splendid wood-fire and sit on the floor with ever so many around me and tell them stories like Scheherazade."

"Well, you might begin now. Here is the fire and the floor," said the host.

"I haven't put my wonderful stories in the right shape yet. I want to learn about Persia and Arabia and all those mysterious Eastern countries where the queer things happen and there are genii and strings of jewels hanging on trees and people who can be transformed into different things."

"How long will I have to wait?"

"Oh, Prim, tell him about the Kron," exclaimed Linn.

"You must excuse them," said Mrs. Firth deprecatingly. "They are so much alone and they have to entertain each other, and sometimes it's just foolishness."

"But what is this about the—what did you call it?" glancing around.

Laurel had crawled up on her mother's lap and dropped asleep. Chan was on Mr. Mann's knee, the others in a little huddle before the fire.

"It's a funny long word that no one but Prim can say," explained Chan. "And now he's clear inside of the earth where he makes 'ructions."

“Why, yes, I want to hear about him.”

“Go on, Prim,” prompted Linn.

“It’s the Chrononhontontholagosphorus.”

“The what!” ejaculated Mr. Mann, in amaze.

“The Chrononhontontholagosphorus.”

He laughed until he shook Chan. “That beats me,” he admitted. “I never could remember it. And what about him?”

Primrose had been so grave that she seemed in dead earnest.

“Go on,” prompted Linn again.

“Well, once clear up by the North Pole, where the cakes of ice float around in summer and freeze together in winter this big animal lived. There was a lot of bears—I don’t know whether you call them a drove or a herd. They’d crawled out and they were awful hungry, and they were white as snow, for the cold had bleached them all up. They looked around and espied this strange thing; he was lying in a heap then and didn’t look so big, and they said to each other, ‘Oh, let us go over there and kill him. He’ll make us a good dinner.’ So they started off and took long strides from cake to cake and came along cautiously. The mean old thing never stirred until they were up quite close, when he made a spring and caught the foremost one with his huge paw. The others turned and

fled while he was eating up their companion. Then they saw an immense whale, who had come up to breathe, and they said, 'There's an awful creature up there on that cake of ice. Can't you thrash round with that splendid big tail of yours and turn the cake over so he will drown? for we don't believe he can swim a bit, and if he stays we're afraid he will eat us all up.'

"Now the whale was good-natured, for he had been swallowing loads of fishes, and he thought it would be quite fun. So he said, 'Yes. Now you watch and see me.' Then he began to make a terrible commotion, and the Chrononhontholagosphorus looked up and began to teeter. The cake of ice broke loose and he was too clumsy to jump anywhere, but the other cakes broke loose, too. The whale kept on, and the bears danced and howled, their way of rejoicing, and the poor old fellow had to go on and on. Now you know, there is an open polar sea—the geography says so—and so that must be true. Well, he struck that, and then he floated on, but the whale was bound to drown him if he could, for he thought he couldn't swim. He began to claw the cake of ice and that kept breaking off, and presently there was a great black pit, and over he went head first."

The children all drew a long breath when Prim

made this pause, many times as they had heard the story. Mr. Mann started, too.

“Oh, I hope that isn’t the end,” he said. “A creature with such a long name ought to have a long life.”

“He is alive yet,” returned Prim solemnly. “I don’t believe he will ever die. You see, up there the earth is sort of flattened and there’s a pole running through it, so there has to be a hole. It was turning round just then, and it swept the Chronon-hontontholagosphorus in, and down he went.”

“And what then?” with almost the eagerness of a child, wondering how she was to work to an end.

“There’s a great space and there’s another world inside. Teacher read about it one day, though she said she didn’t really believe it; but no one truly knows for fair. Well, the Chronon-hontontholagosphorus floundered around; he had cat’s eyes and could see in the dark, and it looked very queer. Then he got awfully hot; he could hardly get his breath. So he sprang up on top of a high place and put his back against the crust and pushed with all his might, and the crust cracked and made a little streak of light, and the wind blew all about and that refreshed him. Then he went on and on, for that space wasn’t big enough

to let him through. So after awhile he tried it again, and this time it was terrific. There were explosions, and rivers rushed around, and he was amused at the great commotion he had created, and thought he'd go on having some more fun. So he does that every now and then, and we have an earthquake."

"Is that how it happens?" Mr. Mann threw back his head and laughed.

"There is some one truly there. Teacher read about him. His name is Enceladus. But I like my big fellow better. I thought him up myself."

"You are a genius, certainly. Do you know any more?"

"Oh, Mr. Mann, I ought to take the children home. It is getting late," protested the mother.

"You had better wait for the moonlight. That will be along presently."

"Tell him about the Meggy," interposed Linn. "That won't take very long, and it's so splendid here."

Linn was hugging his knees and rocking himself to and fro, the picture of enjoyment.

"That's a dictionary thing. I found the picture of him one day. Dictionaries are splendid. When I get big and earn some money I'm going to buy

one. There's so many pictures you can tell stories about."

"But the—what is it? You'll have to write these queer names out for me. And to-morrow, when I am in town, I'll buy a big picture dictionary, and every time you come over you shall have it."

"Oh, thank you! Well, before there were any people in the world there were all kinds of animals and beasts and things, and this was a horrid great thing, but they hadn't any names yet, the Bible says so. And this beast of a thing went around eating up all the smaller ones, who had to fly for their lives. They grew awfully tired of it, and held a council where they thought up ever so many plans, but they all seemed rather lame. Then a cunning fox said:

" 'There's a great quagmire over there in that boggy place, and if he once got in, he is so big and clumsy he never could get out. Instead of hiding away, let's form a great body and go leaping before him. We're so light we can skip from bog to bog, and we'll keep well in advance.' "

"They all shouted so that the beast woke up, and presently he found where they were. They chattered and screamed, and some of them made piteous cries, as if they were afraid. When he saw

the great concourse he put off after them, picking his way. But presently his forefeet went down pretty deep and he plunged around, and when he got them out he gave a big leap where the quagmire was awfully soft and down he went with all four feet. Then he couldn't get out, and it began to rain and the great marsh filled up, but he kept sinking deeper and deeper. When it cleared up the other things came back, and the great hornets stung him and the eagles and condors clawed him, the foxes and the wolves tore great pieces out of him and had a fine feast, and so the poor fellow soon died. Well, after that there was a great landslide that covered him up, and the earth and the rocks buried him, and that was thousands of years ago. Then there came people on the earth, and they cleared it up and leveled it and began to make houses and farms. And one day a lot of workmen got down to him and they threw out heaps of bones. And then a man with a notebook and a pair of spectacles came along and looked them over and said they were great curiosities and wanted them, and an Italian who was working on a railroad came and said, 'Me gather um, me gather um,' and so he did, and put them in a great bag to be taken to a museum, and they strung them on wires and the man thought that a good name;

but he wanted to be polite and he called it *Meg-a-the-ri-um*, and that's the way it is in the dictionary."

"Primrose, you have the genius of a discoverer," and Mr. Mann laughed again heartily. "I'll get the dictionary for you and you shall pay me by degrees."

"They're not real stories and we only tell them for fun, but teacher sometimes reads stories aloud that aren't a bit better."

"You'll do for Scheherazade."

"Oh, Mr. Mann, it's just the children's foolishness—you know they have to amuse each other. We haven't any neighbors. And we have had such a lovely day! It's just a Thanksgiving. We never had one like it. But we must go. There'll be the fire to make up——"

She partly rose with Laurel in her arms, and then leaned back again. How sort of pretty and girlish she looked, her cheeks flushed with the warmth, and that deprecating expression in her eyes. For a moment he stared. The children were expressing their joy and made quite a hubbub.

"Oh, children!" she exclaimed helplessly. "And the twins are fast asleep."

Rhoda lay with her head in the lap of Amaryll-

lis, and they made a pretty group on the floor. A curious longing pervaded the man's heart.

"Mrs. Firth, please let some of them stay; the twins and——" he looked eagerly. Should he choose Prim or Marigold, so he compromised on Amaryllis. "And my boy Chan here, and Tip, if he will——"

"Oh, yes," interrupted Mrs. Alden. "We can make them comfortable."

"It's too much trouble. I can't impose on you so. And they haven't any nighties," she said, in a flurried tone.

"We can find something."

"Why, you can put them in a pillowcase and pin it up about the neck. The Esquimau children are put in a fur bag with a cap over their heads and just a little breathing hole," announced Marigold.

Mrs. Firth stood Laurel on the floor and Rilla woke up her mate. No, she couldn't consent to their staying. They would be bundled up warm and a good fire would soon be blazing in the stove. Oh, they must go, and she really appealed to Mr. Mann with such beseeching eyes that he gave in.

Dan brought the sleigh around. The babies were bundled up head and ears, one in the mother's arms, the other in the eldest sister's. The fur robes

were packed around tightly, and Tip and Chan ran back into the warm house.

“It seems cruel to take those little ones out,” said Mrs. Alden.

“And now, children, you must go to bed,” said their host. “Tip, the bears have all hidden in their holes and they wouldn’t come out for ten little boys. Chan, my little lad, good-night.”

CHAPTER XVI

MAKING A DREAM COME TRUE

ADONIJAH MANN came back to the room where the echo of children's voices seemed to linger. How merry they had been! That was what houses were for, to be made into delightful homes with children growing up in them, loving, enjoying, having good times that would shed a radiance all along manhood and womanhood.

He took out his cigar, bit off the end, but did not light it. If *they* were here he should give up smoking; he had never cared much for it. With him it had been a lonely man's comfort. He moved his chair a little so he could see the willow rocker where *she* had been sitting with the sleeping child in her arms when the thought had startled him. Well, why not? It would come hard to have her household depleted. It would perhaps cause heart burnings to have two or three of them on the fortunate and indulged side of life and the others struggling with poverty. Oh, it would never do!

What did he want with all this prosperity? He was not a millionaire, but business was going on well with him and Mr. Ross. There would be enough. And why not spend it on these children instead of leaving it to an orphan home when he was dead?

Besides, he was learning that he had a large social side to his nature, also a longing for affection. He had been shut out of that, starved in the earlier years. He was five-and-forty now; there might be a quarter of a century added to his years—some men live to fourscore. Time enough to see them all grown up, the girls to have lovers and husbands, the boys to make their way in the world and have homes. Then there would be grandchildren. Twenty lovely, heartsome years. And she—he could count up her years. Married at twenty-three, only a little over fifteen years ago. Their ages would be suitable, certainly. And if they stayed in the little old red house the hardest pull was yet to come. And the children might never reach the standing for which nature had really given them the ability. Poverty was a hard master and made many slaves.

Was that Dan coming back so soon? How long he had sat here dreaming. He rose and went to the door.

"You left them all right?"

"Oh, yes. Well, it's been a great day! And they sang all the way home. They're the jolliest crew you'd meet in a month of Mondays. They did have a grand good time."

"Thank you."

"Why, I think I've had a wonderful Thanksgiving, too," rejoined Dan.

Why shouldn't they have a grand good time all the rest of their lives?

The little old house was dark and cold, but they soon had lights and a fire and the pleasures were sandwiched between the discomforts, for they kept up a stream of gay laughter. The twins were laid in a bundle on the trundle-bed, while their nighties were brought out to warm. There were two pieces of soapstone on the stove heating, for the garret was cold.

"See here," exclaimed Linn; "I'll bring Chan's cot out here and the girls can sleep in my bed. With the doors open it will soon be warm all through."

"That's ever so good of you, Linn," and Rilla kissed him.

"After having had such a splendid day one ought to——"

"And the dinner! And that elegant fire! And

then sitting on the floor. It gave you such a good, homey feeling."

"But you *were* foolish, Prim. The stories do here at home, but when you are out——"

"Momsey, we don't often go out. No one ever asked us all at once except on the Sunday-school picnic, and then you have to take your own provisions, and they made Rilla run about and wait on folks. And, oh my! To have some one come in and take away the dinner and bring in lovely plates and dessert and all! I don't think Mr. Mann minded *very* much."

"He enjoyed every bit of it," declared Linn stoutly. "He's of the merry sort."

"And that dimple in his cheek! Oh, I wish I had it!" confessed Marigold for about the hundredth time.

"And here's a lovely big basket of things——"

"I'm hungry. Why, we could almost eat our breakfast. Oh, yes, let's have some of these nice biscuits and just a bite of the ham," begged Linn. "I don't believe we'll ever have another such a feast in all our lives."

Mrs. Firth protested and they gave in. It was midnight before they were all in bed, and it *was* hard for Linn to get up by lamplight and turn out in the frosty morning for his more than a

mile walk. But he laughed and whistled on the way and tried to get in every syllable of the Kron.

Mrs. Firth did not have to go out to work, and there was no school until Monday. How fortunate that Linn was earning a little, for her sewing was dropping off. It was quite dull last winter, she remembered. Most people were sewing up new frocks and aprons for Christmas gifts and hoarding the money to buy them. But there was work enough to be done at home.

"And let us cut up the rest of the rubbish into carpet rags," said housewifely Amaryllis. "If we could have two new breadths in the spring! I mean to fix up the west end of the garret real nice so it will look almost like a room. If we could only have some kind of a bureau to put our nicest things in, Goldie and I."

"When old Mrs. Preston dies, and it can't be long now, Eliza Ann is going to sell out all the things and go to her brother's. It's all hundred-year-old truck, like Aunt Hitty's, but sometimes a piece or two comes in handy. Maybe we might buy something."

Prim told the twins Mother Goose and all the rhyming stories she could remember and sewed carpet rags almost as fast as she talked. They had a dinner feast from the basket.

"I suppose Tip and Chan are having nice things, and at the Beers' there'll be the Thanksgiving fragments for Linn, so we can eat up the good things without any misgivings of conscience, as Granny Keen calls it. I hope some one gave her a nice dinner. We haven't seen her in a long while."

"Poor old soul," commented Mrs. Firth sympathetically.

"Now, Mis' Firth," began Marigold, in a mumbling way, as if her teeth were out, "would you druther be lost at sea er in a railroad smosh? 'Cause if you're wracked on the land, there you stand, an' if you're lost in the sea, there you be. I hain't never been able to make up my mind."

It was an excellent imitation of Granny Keen, and one of her never-solved puzzles, rather funny, seeing she was not likely to journey either way.

"Oh, Marigold!" her mother protested, yet she laughed.

It was almost night when Dan brought the two boys home. They had been taken over to Ridgewood and went to some lovely stores. In one there was a band and the funniest little play in which the actors never spoke but made signs, only you could tell what they meant just as plain as day. And at another place there was a Punch and Judy show the like of which they had never

seen before, and which Tip never tired of exploiting afterward for the benefit of the twins, but Rilla had to rig him up another doll.

"And he was just as good as he could be," said Chan, "and never cried a word."

"Why, there wasn't nothing to cry about," said Tip, in a sort of grandiose manner.

Chan sat down beside his mother when it was too dark to do anything. The others were around by the stove engrossed with Punch and Judy.

"Chan dear," his mother began, in a low tone, "did Mr. Mann say anything about—about your coming——"

"No, mother; but I guess it was because I said I'd have to stay home and help you now that Linn was away. But he's awful good and sweet to me, and calls me his little boy, and he's going to get a pretty bookcase over there for me to keep all those nice books in, and I can make believe borrow them and bring home one at a time to read. I know he loves me very much; you can always tell when it is real, true love, can't you?"

"Yes, dear, you surely can."

"Wasn't it splendid yesterday! Oh, it makes such a nice thing to talk about. And the house is so grand and pretty. And in the summer he said I could learn to ride on Lady Betty, but I

think I like Bonnie best. She rubs her nose in your hand in such a cunning way. I'm not a bit afraid of her, but Lady Betty looks at you and snaps her eyes as if she said: 'Oh, you don't know the pranks I am up to!'"

His mother laughed softly.

"So maybe I won't go until next summer. We'll get used to it by that time, and Tip will be bigger. But when I think of it I feel as if I would like to be two boys—twins," with a ripple of mirth, "so if one went there, the other could stay here."

"That would be nice." His mother kissed him.

Sunday it snowed again, just a little to help up the roads. It didn't matter in the country, where there was plenty of room and you did not have to hire it carted away. It was not so snapping cold and the sun shone like a jolly fellow, so on Monday there was almost a frolic at school, snowballing and building a fort. They built one every winter and a snow man just as big as patience and courage could construct. And the children were very much interested in the Firths' Thanksgiving and could hardly understand it when this Mr. Mann wasn't any real relation.

Prim had asked Chan confidentially if Mr. Mann thought her *very silly*.

"Why, no. That means foolish. He thinks you are smart, and he don't see how you can think up such funny things. He has a big dictionary, and we looked up that 'meg' thing, and there it was, sure enough, only he didn't see how you could put it together in such a funny fashion. Oh, a dictionary *is* splendid, but his cost eighteen dollars, and that's a sight of money. I don't think we've ever had eighteen dollars at once."

"Well," with a reflective sigh, "we've had lots of fun."

No one wanted Mrs. Firth that week. She had been so busy all the fall that she quite missed it. There was nothing she actually needed to buy—for a wonder. No one wanted shoes, though she felt that Tip ought to have new rubber boots soon. It was Thursday afternoon, and she sat by the window sewing when the sleigh drove up and Mr. Mann sprang out.

She opened the door, and he stepped in, bright and rosy.

"Will you bundle up the twins and let Amaryllis take them out. Rilla, I think you do not get quite your share of the good things going round, you are such a stay-at-home, mother-like body, yet you are the first one I invited to ride with me—that day I brought you up from the store."

"Oh, yes, I remember," and the brown eyes lighted up with pleasure.

"Well, get ready now. It's almost like a spring day, and I'm afraid it will take the snow off too fast. I've grown very fond of sleighing. That's one of the enjoyable country habits. Come, get ready."

No one thought to demur. The twins were bundled up and had extra stockings pulled over their little feet and legs. Mr. Mann carried them out. Rilla had Lal on the seat with her and they were swathed like mummies, while Dan hugged up Rhoda with his strong arm. Bonnie was alone to-day.

Then Mr. Mann led Mrs. Firth back into the house, and for a moment something new in his demeanor made her feel a little strange.

"Won't you sit down?" she said. Of course he would have to stay until Dan came back.

"I'll take off my coat." He hung it over the back of the chair and placed his hat on the seat. "I've come over to talk of several matters, and that was why I didn't want any audience or any interruption."

Oh, it was about Chan. She smiled vaguely, but she stood still with a sort of feeling that her guest must be seated first. And as he studied her

a flush of something akin to bashfulness stole over her.

"Yes," hardly realizing what she was saying, "Chan——"

"It isn't about Chan now. It's about myself. These matters come easy enough to young people, I suppose, but plain old fellows like me have to go straight to the point. I've come over to ask you to marry me."

"To—to——" She was so surprised that she wavered a little, and he caught her with one arm.

"Yes, to marry me." There was almost a mirthful sound in his voice.

"Oh, I couldn't," tremulously.

"Couldn't? And why?"

"Oh, there are all the children. Eight of them. Any one would think you were crazy."

"And the children are what I want. Why, I've wanted them all my life. *She* was not fond of children, she thought them a great bother and expense. And when I came to Grafton I fancied I would take one or two out of an institution, but I felt I would like to know about their mothers, which I couldn't. And then I found yours in that funny fashion;" laughing from a satisfied heart.

"I had resolved to give you Chan——"

“And that Thanksgiving night I felt they ought not be separated. Then I saw you with the little girl in your arms and knew you were the wife I wanted, though I had not thought much of marrying before. Then the children would have their own mother.”

“But you can’t understand,” she pleaded. “You have never really known about children. No matter how well you love them, they are a great care and trouble. They do so many little things you don’t want them to do, things that are not vicious, either. They dispute, too; they are not always kind to one another. They make a sight of work, and there is the great question of what you will do with them as they grow older, what is best for them. But when they are yours you love them and they love you, and every little life is a part of your own, and it would be a hard wrench to give any of them up——”

“And if one small woman can care for them as you have done, can’t a strong man with plenty of means come in and help carry the burden? Yes, let me. And let me care for you and give me a little love in return. That is all I ask. The children and some love from you.”

“People would think you were crazy. And there is that nice Mrs. Alden. She would be

good to Chan, I know. She is so sweet and refined and——”

“She couldn’t be quite an own mother. She might do for an institution child, but Chan would know the difference. And it would be a sin to part them. Then I haven’t a relative that I know of who could feel aggrieved, and as for outsiders, I don’t care a button for their opinion so long as I keep honest and upright myself. And I want *you*.”

She was as bad as Tip. She leaned her face down on his broad breast and cried softly. It didn’t seem as if she had any right to take so much.

After some moments he raised the face and kissed it. She had been so much with children that she was simple as a child herself. Then he took a seat and drew her down on his knee.

“That is all settled,” he began, in a joyous tone that thrilled her. “I’ve thought it over and over and planned it all out. Christmas falls on Thursday. You will all come over on Wednesday morning. I want a pretty wedding that will be something for the children to remember. It will be along in the afternoon, and then there’ll be a sort of little feast with wedding-cake and all that. I shall ask only the Rosses, and your guests may be

the minister and his wife. Then we'll begin our lives on Christmas morning. There may be years of delight for us if it please God, and we shall see the children growing up into nice men and women and having a fair chance with life and education and all that. I don't mean that you shall ever be sorry that you gave them to me, and I want to make *you* very happy. I want you to love me, for I've never had much love. I was reading some verses the other evening where the man wanted to live until he had found what 'some have found so sweet,' and that was love."

She drew a long breath. What wonderful thing had come to her! But presently she said, with a scarletface and downcast eyes: "You are so good, but you don't know—what real poverty is and the straits it puts you in. You see, we have the house and the big garden and enough to eat, and my pension. The neighbors have been very good. They see that I have all the fuel I need, and in killing-time they send in meats and sausage and all that. And I've earned a little money sewing for them. But—I couldn't get ready, and I wouldn't want to shame you. Oh, perhaps it wouldn't be best——"

"It is all right and planned out in the best way. I studied it all over before I spoke. For the

children's sake you will let me have my way. What does it matter? I and my money will belong to you and we will both enjoy it."

The bells gave warning.

"This is our secret for the present; we will not take any one into our counsel," and he rose to open the door.

Amaryllis laughed, with shining eyes and rosy cheeks. Ah! she didn't know how soon she was to be his daughter and bring gladness into his life. They trooped in.

"I've had the loveliest ride!" she exclaimed joyously.

"I had 'ovely yide," said Laurel, holding out both hands.

"Laurel Firth, if I was a big girl, going to be six years old next June, I would try to talk plain," declared Rhoda, with a great accession of dignity.

Mr. Mann caught her up in his arms and kissed her. She could afford to be the baby a while longer.

"She has until next June, anyhow, Miss Consequence," he returned laughingly.

"And I am a thousand times obliged," continued Amaryllis. "We've been all over, and Linn came out and waved his hand to us."

Mr. Mann put on his fur coat. He would have

liked to clasp Bessy Firth inside of it, and he said in a low tone, "Sunday afternoon."

"Why, mother, you look almost as if you had been crying," said Rilla. "Is he going to take Chan soon?"

"Well—not very," she replied unsteadily, and went to mend the fire that had dropped down.

"O dear! How splendid it will be for Chan. And—don't you think we can go over and visit him? I do like Mr. Mann so very much."

The mother's face was scarlet again. She almost kissed her secret into her daughter's surprised look. Oh, was it really true?

CHAPTER XVII

A FAIRY GODFATHER

"MRS. ROSS, ma'am, I've taken your advice and am going to marry."

Mr. Mann had entered the cozy sitting-room where he was always a welcome guest.

"Oh, I am so glad," and she gave a quick smile. "Mrs. Alden, of course."

"No, it isn't Mrs. Alden——"

"Oh, not some foolish young thing, I hope?" with an expression of genuine distress.

"No, of very suitable age. It's—it's that little Chan's mother."

"Mr. Mann!" in a horrified tone. "And aren't there eight children? Why, you are——"

"No, in my senses. I wanted the children." He laughed joyously and with a spice of mischief as well. "If Mrs. Alden had had some little ones she would have captured me in the summer. But it would have been the old story. Then I thought I'd adopt Chan, but the loyal little fellow hated to give up his mother. They're a nice, healthy lot

and any man may be proud of them, and I love the mother. Then I've money enough to care for them all. It will be the making of eight nice men and women I hope. It will be as good as leaving some money to an orphan asylum."

"Well—if you are suited." But it was only half-heartedly. She was so surprised.

"Yes, and you are about the only real woman friend I have. I want you to stand by me and help me out a little, and to come up. I've planned to be married Wednesday afternoon so the children can have a real Christmas. It will be at my house where there is plenty of room. And I don't want her bothered with anything—besides I don't believe she'd really know. I'm going to do the shopping, wedding gown and all, and I want your help."

Mrs. Ross did not like it at all, and she was disappointed for her friend. But on the other hand he had been such a good friend to them, and truly the author of their prosperity. Then he did need some woman's counsel. How could he get along alone? Then, too, she, like most women, was interested in wedding gear.

"At your house," she said, with cool deliberation, "in the evening?"

"No, about four, I think, and then a little wed-

ding feast. We'll give the men a half-holiday, and you and Mr. Ross will come up——”

“We are going to mother's,” hesitatingly. “She is to come in and take the children with her on Tuesday, and they are to spend the whole vacation. We were to go Wednesday evening.”

“Wait until Thursday morning. Mr. Ross is willing. Then you can come up at noon, or you might come in the morning and he at noon.”

The face and voice were alike persuasive.

“And the shopping, what about that?” she asked.

“Oh, when you can spare the time. Some things for the little girls, and—a pretty, soft wedding gown.”

“Silk?” at a venture.

“No, I think I do not care for that. I saw some a few days ago. You know, if I gave her two or three diamonds and a handsome necklace and so on, that would be all right. We'll save the diamonds until some other occasion,” and he gave a short laugh. “Something soft and white and clinging——”

“White?” raising her eyebrows.

“Yes, I want it nice for the children to remember. I want to think myself of some one in bridal fairness. Before, we went to a parson-

age in everyday gear. It was sordid, joyless, not a friend to wish us Godspeed. It need not have been so, but I had not the courage to make a protest. It was all work and parsimony. It does not make the best kind of men and women, if it makes money. And now I am going to have it all different. We have no friends to annoy by our lack of conventionalism. It is just for ourselves. We shall live for each other and the children, going back to a certain youthfulness of gladness. I've been learning the pleasure it affords one's self to give joy to others. And so if you will help me out a little—it is asking a good deal. She couldn't do any of this even if we waited until spring without the neighborhood's knowing and wanting to discuss and advise."

Mrs. Ross felt that she did not quite approve, but it was his life and his happiness. So she yielded and they did the shopping, she tempering the man's ideas. An outfit for the little girls, and he found among what the magnificent saleslady called simple evening dresses something quite to his liking.

"That is nun's-veiling," said Mrs. Ross. It was soft and fine and prettily made, but not very grand.

"I didn't want anything stiff or glossy, but to

fall around like a cloud. Yes, that will do. And a pretty dress to wear to breakfast. I believe I should like pink."

She talked him out of that. There was a delicate gray with pink pipings and pale pink bows, so the order was made out. No, she would not take anything for herself—she was truly glad to be of service to him.

"Dan," he said on reaching the station, "drive round to the little old house."

The children had just reached home, having snowballed and sledded on the way.

"I want Chan to come over and stay all night," he announced, "and go to the city to-morrow. Nurse Jane wants to see him, and we'll have a little lark by ourselves. Everything is all right," he said with joyous, meaning eyes to the mother.

So Chan put on his best suit and felt there was something gay and unusual in the air.

There was his room that had been put in order as a surprise. The corner room had been newly furnished. It had a big bay window in it, and just off it, over the hall, was this with dainty papering, a little white bed, a handsome combination bookcase and desk, a table, and some chairs.

"Dan may bring your books over some day,

and you can arrange them. Any other things that have grown dear to you——”

Chan tried to wink the tears away, then he hid his face on the capacious breast.

“I mean you to be very happy here, little lad. This is my room, so you will be near by. And now we’ll go down and sit by the fire. I have something else to tell you.”

There was not the great Thanksgiving blaze, but just a cozy little one with red and blue and yellow gnomes chasing each other about. He took the big “Morris” chair and lifted Chan up on his lap, let him snuggle down with the caressing arm about him.

“Chan, I’m going to trust you with a secret and you must keep it sacredly until—let me see—next Wednesday. Then your mother and all the children are coming over for a good long visit and the merriest sort of a Christmas. And to-morrow we are going to buy Santa Claus gifts for Linn and Tip, and have a gay little run about, and go up to the hospital. I really ought to have taken you before. They all want to see you.”

“Oh, I think there ought to be fairy godfathers, but in the stories they are always fairy godmothers. And you are just one.” He reached up and kissed him. “You do so many beautiful

things. And I almost didn't want to come and live here, because, you see, I'd grown so used to them at home, and mother is so sweet, but I'll come and stay, and be your little boy always——" and the soft, child's voice had a little break in it.

"Yes, dear. Thank you. We are not going to lose sight of them, you know, and I hope you will go on loving them. We are going to have a fine Christmas as you will see."

Then they talked over the hospital days and poor little Arthur, and presently Chan went to bed in his room, and Mr. Mann in the other. Yes, it would be very nice, and he was quite reconciled to leaving the little old red house.

It was a nice day, and the big boy and the little boy did have a jolly time shopping. Suits all the way through and stylish shoes and a box of white silk neckties. And Chan must have a handsome, light gray suit——

"But mine is so nice," he protested. "Mother's so careful of it, and I only wear it on Sundays and when I come here. It seems as if—as if there was going to be a great party."

"There is, a Christmas party. And now you must choose some toys. What would Tip like?"

There were so many splendid things. He went from one to another. But the train of cars with

the engine and the man at the helm, and the stoker with his shovel, and the brakeman standing on the platform took his fancy altogether, only he was afraid it would cost too much.

"Santa Claus has a long purse," laughed Mr. Mann.

"But I know Linn would like books best, because he was wishing he had some like mine. And you see if I take mine away he can't read them."

So books it was. Then they had luncheon, and afterward went to the office for Mr. Mann to look over his mail. There was a foreign one with a Russian stamp.

"Chan," he exclaimed, "I must get you a book for postage stamps. I have some quite rare foreign ones," and he cut around this and laid it in a small box. How odd a letter should come from St. Petersburg. He cut open the end—glanced down the page to the signature "Howard Gwynne."

It concerned Chan. But then the boy was his. He would never leave him for any other friend.

It was certainly complimentary to the child. Mr. Gwynne recalled himself to Mr. Mann's mind by the interest he had taken in Chandler Firth's unusual musical ability. He had intended to be

back by the beginning of the new year, but it would be April instead. Would Mr. Mann keep watch over the child and see that he was well cared for physically, and if his parents were in poor circumstances, as he believed he had heard, he would cheerfully advance any sum to keep him in good condition, as he was most anxious to see him again, and he referred him to his banker. The child was too promising to be allowed to slip out of sight.

Chan was looking over some curious little dies, and did not remark the eyes turned upon him with such tenderness. "You are *my* little lad," Mr. Mann whispered to himself, "and it isn't at all likely you will have to go round the world singing for a living. I shall have the best right——"

Still Mr. Gwynne must have thought him something unusual to take all that interest in him.

He put the note into a private drawer, and looked over the others. Then after a talk with Mr. Ross he said:

"Come, Chan, now for the hospital and Nurse Jane."

The child's eyes were alight with the expected pleasure.

It looked strange and yet curiously familiar, like the remembrance of a dream, as Chandler

Firth went through the wide hall. Dr. Richards was not in, but the surgeon came to take a look at his patient so fair and rosy and straight now. And here were the matron and the nurses and the sun parlor and the little ones, some who would never be any better, and some who would be discharged in a few weeks, and dear Nurse Jane who took both his hands in hers and kissed him.

"Why, you have grown," she exclaimed, "and how well you look! I'm glad to see you again, for we really did miss you. I suppose you had your legacy all right. Mr. Collamore came here, and he was quite touched with your attention to Arthur and the will which pleased the poor dying boy so much."

"Oh, the books were beautiful," returned Chan, "and he sent me Arthur's pretty gold watch, and wrote such a sweet letter that mother and Rilla and I cried over it."

"I liked him better than I supposed I should, and Arthur *was* much better off here than left at home. Wasn't your mother surprised and happy?"

"She just was. They were all so glad. I'm going to school now, and it's a good long walk, but I don't get a bit tired. You were all so kind to me."

"And you were such a lovely patient."

He glanced up with smiling eyes.

Here was the little bed where he had lain in the plaster cast and been fed like a baby. There was a bigger boy in it whose head was held in a sort of a frame and whose face wore a most distressed expression, not even lighting up at the nurse's tender tones. And just over there little Arthur had taken his journey from pain and hopelessness to the better country, where the glorified body would be straight and perfect. It all seemed like a pathetic dream, but he was glad he had come, and had seen dear Nurse Jane.

Then to the train and home again.

"It's been a splendid day, only it doesn't seem as if you ought to have bought me so much, and all the pleasure and the luncheon——"

"Well, you are my little boy. The first little boy I ever owned, at least, I own as much as half of you," laughingly. "And you can tell them about the hospital and the Christmas sights in the stores and how your room looks, but the other will be *our* Christmas secret."

"And doesn't mother know——"

Mr. Mann flushed. "Yes. You know I had to ask her first. But we don't want the children to get it whispered about. Why, it's only five

days now," and a happy light went over his face as if the pleasure to him was going to be great indeed. Chan felt as if there was something he did not quite understand, but he was going to keep his part of the secret loyally.

So they said good-by. Dan would take the little boy over home.

The neighbors wondered at the many boxes and packages they watched going into the Mann house.

Mrs. Greer, who lived on the lower side, ran in to Mrs. Chedister's.

"What *do* you suppose is going on?" she asked in a sort of fever heat. "Can it be that Mr. Mann is planning to be married, yet it does seem like it. I wonder if it is to his housekeeper. She's a very nice-appearing person, but it would make it quite awkward. Of course we are not expected to be on calling terms with housekeepers."

"It *is* embarrassing when a man does that, and I think it a very ill-judged step. The woman hasn't any real social position. It seems to me Mr. Mann might look higher. He has a nice business standing and is a man of means, and the men like him, and he doesn't seem afraid of spending his money."

"That's a beautiful team of his,"

"Yes. Now if we kept a man I'd put him up to finding out something by that Dan. But I suppose we'll learn by and by. Only one wouldn't know just how to receive the new Mrs. Mann."

So they gossiped up and down the avenue.

Over at the little red house they talked about Christmas. It seemed to Marigold that her mother acted quite indifferent. They had very little money, to be sure, for she had not been doing much. She went over to Mrs. Townsend's on Monday and helped make mince pies and put up curtains, and do various odds and ends as they were going to have a Christmas eve party for the young folks. Marigold made over Laurel's rag doll, put in blue eyes and black eyebrows, and begged a little red ink for the lips. She and Rilla had been knitting the twins new hoods. Prim made a picture-book, cutting flowers out of old garden calendars her father had laid away, and pasting them into an old blank-book.

"Oh dear, if we could only have a real rich Christmas for once," and she sighed. "Mother, aren't you going to make *anything*?"

"I'm going to the store to-morrow to get a few things. Oh, yes, I'll make some crullers——"

"And gingerbread men! It wouldn't be Christ-

mas without them. We'll hang up our stockings anyhow. And maybe——”

She didn't hardly dare let the “maybe” fly. If she had she would have said, “Maybe Mr. Mann will bring us something,” but she thought her mother acted rather queer when his name was mentioned.

Amaryllis was making various little things. New white aprons for the twins out of some old white dimity she had found in the rummage heap. If she *could* have spent a little money. Well, they would go to the Sunday-school room on Christmas afternoon and get a cornucopia of candy, an orange, and a book. That would be something.

Chan was very quiet, too, somehow. But then the children were in school all day and stopped coming home to have a little fun. So there was only the evening. School was dismissed Tuesday afternoon, and they could have all day Wednesday.

“If Dan would come and take us out in the big sleigh wouldn't it be splendid!” cried Primrose, and they all gave a long, deep sigh.

Mother came home with quite a big parcel, and of course no one would peep into it. Then she made crullers and a hot johnny-cake for supper, and before they were through Linn came in whistling.

"Why, Linn, what sent you home? To-morrow isn't Christmas!" said Rilla.

"It's first cousin to it, though." Then he looked at his mother and laughed. She flushed up, and then rose and went to the stove as something there needed her.

"And I have a Santa Claus dollar," went on Linn. "I think it is a real Santa Claus when it is something you don't expect. And it was funny, but Mr. Beers always says on Saturday, 'Now you'll be down bright and early Monday morning,' and he never said a word about Friday. But he did say, 'Linn, you've been a good, faithful boy and I wish you the best Christmas you ever had.' Mother, you don't think he means to let me go, do you? I've been doing my very best. You had a long talk with him," and the boy's bright face was very anxious.

"No, Linn, dear. He said to me you gave good satisfaction and he should be very sorry to *have* you go."

"Then I'm *not* going. You may bet your bottom dollar on that."

"Come and have some supper."

"They stuffed me down there. A chunk of raisin cake, lickin' good, too, two doughnuts, and a great piece of mince pie. Next Christmas I

mean to be rich enough to have mince pies—and a turkey.”

“May I be there, here, or wherever it is to share them,” appended Marigold.

It was enough like other nights, except Linn’s being home, yet there seemed something different in the atmosphere. The twins were put to bed, Lal begging that her stocking should be hung up. Tip got his arms around Chandler and insisted upon hearing over again the wonderful things that were in the New York stores. Great stuffed animals, cats that could mew, dogs that could bark, sheep that could ba-a, splendid drums and curious toys and such piles of candies. Linn dropped down on the old lounge and went fast asleep.

Mrs. Firth lighted a lamp, put a shawl around her, and went upstairs. There were some things she wanted to look over. She opened the old chest that had been grandmother’s. Her wedding dress of youth, a plain, simple muslin, was in it. She had meant next summer to make it over for Rilla. There was a hand-wrought lace shawl that her own mother had worked, and some pieces of finery she had never needed for herself. Papers, various things she had tucked away, and a pair of silk stockings, cream color now. She would wear them on Christmas day. Then she dropped

down in a little huddle and cried. Was it true some one was going to take her and the eight children, and that she was to have no more anxiety, no more struggles with poverty, and be happy, be loved! It did not seem true. Wouldn't something happen! One always asks it on the eve of a great joy. She had been loved before, but not in this fashion. Mr. Firth had been twelve years older, and though she and Mr. Mann had come to middle life, it seemed like a new youth to her.

She packed a few things into a basket, and then came downstairs. Oh, how good the warmth felt! She held her hands over the cheering stove.

"Momsey, you look blue and cold, and as if you had been crying. What made you stay so long up in that cold garret?" asked Marigold.

"Why, you sleep up there all night." Her heart leaped at the thought of the comfort they were going to have.

"Well, that's different. We have the good warm brick, and we just cuddle down in the blankets and go to sleep before you can say 'Jack Robinson.'"

"Why do you have to say 'Jack Robinson'?" inquired Tip sleepily.

"Well—I don't know, unless he carries about a bag of sleepy powder. Tip, *do* go to bed."

Chan convoyed him into the bedroom, and soon had him tucked in. Then he came back and placed one small arm about his mother's waist, and whispered, "I know. *He* told me we were to go over for Christmas."

She colored as she bent and kissed him. There was no need of keeping part of the secret any longer. The other he must tell himself.

"Children,"—there were only five now, the others were in bed—"children, we are all going over to Grafton to-morrow to spend our Christmas——"

"Oh, mother!" and Marigold sprang up and gave her a tremendous hug that nearly pushed her over. "Is that what's made you so sort of queer and as if you didn't take much interest in fixing anything? We have been talking about it, and somehow it seemed as if it would be a rather doleful Christmas. Oh, I'm so glad! I could hop around on one foot."

With that she caught Prim, and they pirouetted round the room as if they were born ballet dancers.

"It's so delightful," said Amaryllis sedately. "Mother, doesn't Mr. Mann think of the nicest things?"

"That's why I have a holiday to-morrow, I s'pose." Linn had been wondering all the time.

“And Mr. Beers was so pleasant about it I thought he couldn’t mean to discharge me. Hurray! It’ll beat Thanksgiving I bet a cow!”

“And if you lose you haven’t any cow to pay with,” appended Chan.

“Children, you must all go to bed now. It’s getting late. Yes, it was—it was splendid,” she could think of no other word without betraying herself, “splendid in him to ask us to share his Christmas when we had so little of our own. And I hope you will all be grateful and try your best, for it seems as if Heaven had sent us its choicest blessing.”

Then she kissed them and hurried them off lest she should give way to the emotions that surged within her.

CHAPTER XVIII

A WEDDING AND CHRISTMAS

It was a glorious winter morning. The sun came up out of a sea of iridescent light and presently settled to a flawless blue. There was still sleighing, it took only a little snow to renew it in country places. The older children did up the chores. Linn brought in two armfuls of wood and piled it up behind the stove so that it would get thoroughly dry. Then he fed the chickens and said laughingly—

“Why, it seems like old times. But how will they manage these two days?”

“Oh, some one will have to come over and see to them.”

“Will we come home to-morrow night, think?”

“Why——” His mother made a sudden errand into the bedroom to hide her embarrassment.

Circumstances had favored secrecy and saved Mrs. Firth from curious questioning. The road from Grafton ran straight along until it met the

old north road. That was all big farms, though it led down to the village. This little sort of back lane took in the rear of them. With the exception of the little old red house there was no other for about half a mile and that was Squire Briggs's. After that the real village began, mostly on the other side, where cottages were closer together. Then the matter had been so sudden and strange to her. She had felt that she ought to confide in Mrs. Burnham, but Mr. Mann had said, "Leave that to me. I'll settle it all right." He was not going to have her criticised or commented upon.

The children put on their best clothes.

"Mother, I don't know what we would have done this winter without old Aunt Hitty's bundle," said thoughtful Amaryllis. "And it's funny but we didn't like it much at first. You can do a great many things when you take time to consider. If necessity is the mother of invention, I think poverty must be the father."

"Yes," with a smiling nod.

"There's the sleigh—oh, only the little sleigh!"

Mr. Mann sprang out and blanketed Bonnie, then marched into the house with a merry general greeting, and walked straight over to Mrs. Firth, taking her in his arms and kissing her dozens of times while the children stood in astonishment.

Then he turned her around facing them, but she did not look up.

He was so bright and fresh, clean-shaven, and immaculate in attire, and his face fairly shone with joyous satisfaction, the dimple deeper than ever.

“Children,” and his voice seemed richer and tenderer, “I have asked your mother to marry me, and she has consented. I wanted Chan at first and bargained for him, then on Thanksgiving I found I wanted you all and your mother in the bargain. So you are all to come over, and this afternoon your mother is going to give me herself and all of you children until you are grown men and women. I am to be your father, and my home is to be yours. We are to love each other, to share whatever comes, to make each other as happy as we can for her dear sake.”

There was a curious silence. It was not possible to take it in at a moment. But Amaryllis, who was standing nearest, suddenly put out both hands and clasped his one free arm.

“Oh,” she cried, “I think you are the best and sweetest and dearest man, better than any one in a story book because you are real. And there’s so many of us——”

The spell was broken. They swarmed around

him like bees and he was kissing brows and rosy cheeks and sweet lips.

"Oh, was this what you meant?" said Chan in a breathless sort of voice.

"We've wished we had a father just like you," began Primrose with winning frankness. "When we read the Sunday-school books, and there's some one nice in them, we say, 'Oh, that's like Mr. Mann, isn't it?' There isn't many of the fathers that we like all the way through, but we plan about it and imagine, and have a nicer house than this, but we never thought of anything quite like yours, and oh, I'm so glad I can't hardly hold in. I want to run and shout."

"Maybe you won't like me all the way through."

There was such a funny expression in his face, as if he were trying to look severe and couldn't, and a quiver of mirth all around his mouth.

"Oh, you'll have to laugh," cried Marigold. "No one ever could be much cross with a dimple like that in his cheek. We're not always good, but we'll try. And you're sure you're in dead earnest and not funning in any way? But there's such a lot of us to have!"

"And a big house to put you in. No, my child, we are to have and to hold as long as God spares us and to make each other happy. I

shall want a good deal of love, and I have ever so much to give you——”

“How do people get married?” inquired Tip.
“What does the minister say?”

“You’ll see in good time—about the middle of the afternoon.”

“And don’t we come back to this old house any more? What are the chickens going to do, and the cat?”

“Well—they’ll have to come over too.”

Tip’s face was full of questioning mystery. Neither could Rhoda understand, but Lal contentedly hugged her doll and told her they were going to the man’s house and have dinner.

Linn had come around to his mother’s side and pulled her head down to whisper.

“I’m so glad, mother dear. And now you won’t have to work so hard, and it’ll be so lovely over there, and you won’t have to give up Chan. Seems somehow strange and beautiful, like a little bit out of heaven. Don’t you think God sent us Mr. Mann because he knew how hard it was for you, and then just at Christmas times, too, when the whole world gets glad?”

“Yes, dear,” and they both kissed amid tears of joy and gratitude.

“Now, children,” as Dan drove up with the

big sleigh, "you're all going to be packed in like sardines, and I am to bring your mother," and he unclasped the little arms that were round his legs and body. "Get your wraps and hoods."

Mrs. Firth helped bundle them up.

"Oh, mother, you'll surely come!" cried Primrose.

"Prim, if you doubt my word again I'll shut you up in a dark closet and you shall not have any dinner," declared her prospective father, and saucy Prim laughed and put a kiss in the dimple.

Mrs. Firth looked at her lover. "Oh," and her voice quivered, "I wonder if you will ever be sorry that you took us all. Sometimes children do not turn out well."

"Then you will have me to share the sorrow and trouble. And I do believe a man's authority strengthens and tides over dangerous places. But we won't borrow trouble. We will have a few happy, merry years while they are young. And I shall want a great deal of love to make up for my old starved life. You've had the love, you see."

Could she give him any adequate return? Her life seemed so poor and simple.

"We have hardly been lovers," he said, "so we shall have to be lovers all the rest of our lives."

As for the children they felt as if they had been whisked out of the old orbit and were flying through space like a comet.

"But you knew, didn't you, Chan?" said Amayllis.

"No, not all of it. He told me about coming to keep our Christmas, and I had a feeling that then I'd be expected to stay. And I've such a splendid room and fine bookcase—oh, I'm afraid he's given me too much."

"But, you see," returned Linn, "he's going to have mother, and she's worth the whole lot of us."

"She won't be quite the same to us."

"Mothers don't forget," said Linn stoutly. "And now she won't have to go out sewing and fixing up people's houses, and—Golly! she'll be a real lady! And she won't come home all tired out. And he'll buy her beautiful clothes as he does Chan. And I know she'll love us."

"It's queer anyhow," piped in Marigold. "But he's just tip-top. I've liked him ever since that first day. But, Dan, how will you get along with such a lot of young ones for good and all?"

"I'm like the boss, I take to children. I meant to have some of my own, but that pralasis set in

and left my poor wife like a log. I guess there won't be any trouble," and Dan chuckled.

The neighbors watched the sleigh release its living freight. Eight children again. But Christmas didn't last forever.

Mrs. Alden took off their wrappings and ushered them into the parlor. It had been made fragrant with greens and some beautiful flowers, great roses such as one seldom saw in the winter.

"Why, it looks 'most like a church. Oh, do you suppose they will be married here? I never saw any one married."

"I did once," said Amaryllis, "at the parsonage. But the lady had her hat and cloak on."

"Do you think I might take them up to my room?" Chan asked Mrs. Alden.

"Oh, yes. But do not go into any of the other rooms."

"That's queer," remarked Marigold. "We *have* been in all of them."

There were "ohs" and "ahs" in almost every key. For a moment or two Linn envied his brother. There were the beautiful books ranged on their shelf. The desk was fitted up with needful articles and on one of the brackets was a vase of flowers. On a stand in Mr. Mann's room there was a magnificent bunch. A strange feeling per-

vaded them, all save the twins, and Laurel discovered that she had left dolly behind and began to cry.

“Let’s go downstairs and watch for mother,” said Amaryllis. “Dan will go back and get dolly, though I don’t think she’s fine enough for a house full of flowers like this. Lal, dear, let me show you some pictures. Oh, there they come!”

It seemed to them as if they must have been separated from their mother a whole day instead of an hour. And presently Dan came with some one else, Mr. and Mrs. Ross, and then they were seized with an accession of bashfulness, but luncheon soon obviated that.

Well, they were very passable children, Mrs. Ross admitted to herself. Chan and Marigold and the smaller twin were really pretty, Linn was a manly little fellow, and none of them positively plain. Not rough or uncouth either, and their mother was modest and sweet if she hadn’t Mrs. Alden’s style.

After that they were led upstairs into one of the rooms that had been closed and their breath fairly taken away with a pile of finery on the bed. Then the girls were metamorphosed from country children to fairies, and it was only simple white

frocks and sashes and white stockings and shoes. Their mother kissed them and told them to go down into the library and be quiet and good children.

It was positively funny the way they stared at each other in breathless silence. Even Primrose was awed. Then the boys came down.

"Oh, Linn, you look quite as nice and pretty as Chan! Clothes *do* make a difference!" and Prim was an immense point of admiration.

"And just look at me," said Tip, stretching up his tallest.

There were some guests in the parlor. Mr. Mann brought them through.

"Here are my children," he said laughingly.

They were Mr. and Mrs. Burnham and Katy, who stared at them in surprise, and only knew Chan.

"Not many men begin this way," returned the minister. "I hardly know which side is to be congratulated."

"Both," was the host's answer.

"Mr. Mann——" and he left the room.

"It was a wonderful surprise when Mr. Mann came yesterday and told us," said Mrs. Burnham to Amaryllis. "It's a perfect romance, and your mother deserves the best of fortune, she's been so

devoted to you all. Only—I hope you won't be too much lifted up by sudden prosperity."

"Lifted up?" Amaryllis did not quite understand. In fact in her simple way she had only taken in the good fortune for her mother and a new father for them. That they would be set above many of the Denby folk who had looked down upon them with a sort of pity never occurred to the inexperienced child.

Mrs. Alden came to the door in a pretty, light, silk gown, and, beckoning them out, formed them in a half-circle on each side of the chimney-piece, holding little Lal's hand herself. The others stood just back of the children. And then two people came through, Mr. Mann in white vest and tie, and a beautiful white figure in a clinging gown and train with white flowers in her dark hair, and as he turned her around, the children really saw "the beautifullest mother" as they had never seen her before. She looked so sweet and girlish, as if the beauty of really heroic life had suddenly blossomed out in her face, the seal of the soul taking its reward. He was glad to have her children see her this way. It would be something to remember when they were men and women.

Then there was a pleasant confusion of voices, a moving about, the children were kissed by their

mother and their new father, little laughing sounds, and then Mrs. Burnham sat down to the piano and played what she could remember of the wedding march. After that they went out to the wedding feast, where the table was fragrant with flowers, with the wedding-cake in the middle. The children were quiet from very surprise, but the elders made it cheerful, graciously assisted by the host.

Mr. and Mrs. Ross were taken to their train to go on their Christmas journey.

"It was really a beautiful wedding," she said, "and would have graced a grander occasion. Mrs. Firth—Mrs. Mann, I mean," laughing, "is certainly much more ladylike than one would expect, and the children might have stepped out of a story book. No wonder he is proud of them. But—eight of them!"

They kept Mr. and Mrs. Burnham a while longer, for Katy was just beginning to feel at home with the children.

"She must come over and see them," said Mrs. Mann. "We can send for her almost any time. I should think she would get lonely."

"She does, I know. I don't like her to go to school with so many rough children, but being always with grown folks is not good for a child

nor natural. Dear me, we shall miss you so much, but I *do* rejoice in your good fortune."

"It seems like a dream." Bessie gave a soft little laugh. "I expect Friday morning I shall think I ought to go over to the old house and take up the old life, as if I was not in quite the right place."

After the guests went away they retired to the library. Lide came in and lighted a fire just for the pleasure of the blaze.

"Oh, Mr. Mann, it was just beautiful!" said Marigold with a joyous sigh, if such a thing can be.

"Mr. Mann!" He tried to look severe, but the big dimple gave it away. "Now we are going to begin at once. I shall insist upon all the honors of a large family and be called 'Father.' I shall try to be the best father that I can, and if you do not love me a good deal I shall be broken-hearted. And the first one that calls me Mr. Mann—well, I don't know what will be done to her or him. I think they will have to go over to the little old house and live alone."

"Oh, yes, I know," exclaimed Marigold brightly. "That will be the prison when we're very, very bad. We are sometimes."

"Capital," and he laughed.

They seemed to get settled presently. Linn and Amaryllis were in the front room looking over a portfolio of fine engravings and photographs of the beautiful scenery of America. Marigold and Prim were piecing together a dissecting map on the floor. Rhoda was building a house of dominoes. Tip sat on a taboret studying the fire. Mr. Mann was in the big chair with Chan perched on one arm and leaning his face down on the broad shoulder. It was not as gay as Thanksgiving had been, perhaps they all felt that something mysterious had happened to them.

Mrs. Mann sat beside her husband, and Laurel had crawled up into her lap to be comforted for the forgotten dolly. It certainly was a picture of household content, and Adonijah Mann felt thoroughly happy.

"I can't make it out," and Tip's face was creased in several lines, "just *why* people are married. Did the minister give mother to you? And she didn't belong to him, she belonged to us."

Mr. Mann roused from a reverie with his wife's hand in his. Then he gave a short laugh.

"Tip, there was a place in the ceremony where Mr. Burnham said, 'If any one had any objection he should declare it then, or ever afterward hold his peace.' You've lost your chance."

“ But I can’t understand——”

“ My little lad, she gave herself to me first. And what Mr. Burnham said was the custom and the law of the land. Everything, you’ll find, is governed by some law. But it will be a long while before you need bother about marriage. You are not homesick already and wanting to go back? ”

“ No-o,” in a rather doubtful tone. “ This place is nicer, and you’ve so many beautiful things, and the horses and sleighs, and turkey for dinner all the time, and such splendid cake with sugar on the top——”

“ Oh, Tip! ” and his mother’s face was scarlet.

“ I’ll stay here while you do——”

“ And I’d like to know whether we will all have to change our names like mother,” inquired Marigold, looking up suddenly.

Mr. Mann considered. “ No,” he answered presently. “ I think your name the prettiest, much prettier for girls.”

“ Marigold Mann! Well, that would sound funny. And Primrose Mann! ” laughing.

“ Yes, your name is much to be preferred.”

“ I want my dolly,” piped a sleepy voice. “ And I want to go in my trundle-bed. My eyes won’t stay open.”

"Family cares begin," and Bessy Mann looked at her husband in a humorous fashion. "Come, Rhoda, you must go."

"I can't leave my house. And I'm not sleepy," in a resolute tone.

"Rhoda!"

"And I am afraid to go and sleep in a strange place," in a decisive manner.

"Perhaps Dan had better take you over to the old house." Bessy drew a sort of compressed breath, she deprecated a struggle. And Rhoda could be very willful.

Mr. Mann rose quietly and swooped down on the child, gathering her in his arms, and kissing the protesting lips, half squeezing the breath out of her as he carried her upstairs. Her mother followed with Laurel.

"Family cares are coming soon," she said with a deprecating smile. "Thank you. I can manage them now."

"Rhoda, any little girl that cries cannot have her stocking hung up."

Rhoda had really been too much startled to cry by the summary treatment. She looked at him now with wide open eyes a little defiant.

"Say good-night to father."

"I tan't," murmured Lal. "I so s'eeepy."

So he kissed them both and left them to their mother.

Marigold was tired of puzzling over the map. She picked up the pieces and the dominoes, and laid them on the table. Then she said, "I wonder if rich people hang up stockings. Teacher said there wasn't any Santa Claus, just as if we didn't know when we began to learn about things. But it's the most splendid make-believe I know of."

"What is?" asked Mr. Mann. Then he drew his chair up nearer, took Chan on one knee, and lifted Tip to the other.

"Why—Santa Claus. And can we hang up some stockings?"

"Of course you can. That's half the fun of Christmas."

"I'm so glad you like fun," and Prim squeezed the arm nearer her.

"And I hope we shall have lots of it. I didn't have much when I was a little boy. But then I didn't have any mother."

"And mothers are such lovely things," said Chan. "Better than anything in the wide world."

Mr. Mann smiled down into the little face.

Mother came down smiling as if the trouble hadn't been very serious. She glanced into the other room.

"Come in here, Linn and Rilla." They seemed somehow rather shut out.

"We've been having a nice time over the pictures," explained Amaryllis. "What beautiful places there are in the world. How delightful it would be to see them. Linn and I have been planning when we are quite grown up to—to do something——"

"We may not wait so long as that," said their new father. "I've never been about much only on business journeys."

"I want to go to Niagara," announced Mari-gold.

"Linn, where will you go?" The boy had seemed very quiet this evening.

"Oh, to Washington first of all."

"But New York is splendid!" interposed Chan.

"Oh, there are so many places," sighed Prim.

They fell into an eager talk then until their mother said if they wanted any stockings hung up it was time to go to bed.

The three girls decided to sleep together, and Mr. Mann explained to Linn that presently he was to have a nice room of his own.

"We shall fill up the whole house," their mother said.

"That was just what I wanted," returned the new father.

"Where will the stockings be hung?" asked Prim.

"Just here. We will put a line across. The fire will soon be out and Santa Claus will have a fair chance to come down the chimney."

Mr. Mann said it very gravely, but they all laughed as they said good-night.

"I'm afraid," Bessy began, leaning on her husband's breast, "that Linn is a little bit jealous of all the nice things that have come to Chandler. Maybe it would be better to let him go back to the store this winter. Mr. Beers was very loath to give him up. They will be so much care for you."

"Don't you think I am big enough to shoulder the care? It hasn't turned you old nor gray. Why, I feel ten years younger than I did a month ago. I'm beginning life all over again."

Then they arranged the stockings, eight steps in a row. After that the house lapsed into quiet. But before daylight Mr. Mann was up watching out. And suddenly there was a rush and a shout. "Merry Christmas!" laughed their new father on the landing. "Make it as merry as you can.



“MERRY CHRISTMAS!” LAUGHED THEIR NEW FATHER.—*Page 336.*

But wait till they all come down before you empty your stockings."

They were stuffed full, that they saw. And a pile of things on the mantel covered with flowered crêpe paper. But they didn't have to wait long. The girls were not in wedding gear now, but they looked bright and rosy.

In the stockings was the Christmas they might have had in the old house. An apple, an orange, some crullers, peanuts, and candy, and the gingerbread man with his currant eyes and his red mouth peeping out from the top. After all it was the old fun and took the strangeness off the new home. Then the piles on the mantel were handed down. Linn had some fine books and a little white box in which lay a watch, nice if not so costly as Chan's. Rilla had a beautiful new gown and a necklace and locket. Marigold, the same. Prim, a great variety. Tip, the steam engine and train of cars that you wound up and let run across the floor. Rhoda, a set of pretty dishes big enough for a real tea-party, and Laurel, a beautiful doll.

For a while no one could have heard himself talk. Mr. Mann only laughed. Bessy and Mrs. Alden looked on helplessly, and it seemed as if there might be twenty children instead of eight.

Suddenly a wail startled them.

"Oh, Tip!" exclaimed his mother in despair. "What *is* the matter? You have everything heart can wish, what is there to cry for?"

"I ain't crying for myself!" he flung out indignantly. "I'm crying for the poor little old house that's cold and lonesome and no stockings hanging up and no children running round and wishing 'Merry Christmas,' and laughing and making all ring again with fun. And if you were the poor old house with no fire to warm you, and no one to make you glad and happy you'd cry too."

"Oh, Tip!" Mr. Mann caught him in his arms. "I've heard of people being all heart. See here, Dan shall take you over, and you may kindle up a fire and comfort the old house for the loss of all that were so dear."

Prim caught the little leg and the hand that held it.

"No one shall scold you when you cry, Tip, for if it hadn't been for you nothing would have happened to us. Don't you remember the afternoon we'd been playing in the dirt and were tired, and we sat down on the stoop and you said, 'Let's cry 'cause mother's gone away,' and we cried and cried, and Mr. Mann came along——"

Mr. Mann held up his hand and gave an ominous shake of the head.

"Well, you weren't our father then, you *were* Mr. Mann," continued Prim in no wise abashed. "And you stopped and asked us what we were crying about. And if it hadn't been for Tip we wouldn't have cried, and you wouldn't have found us, and we'd never had this supersplendatious Christmas nor any new father. And how we looked! Goldie hustled us into the house to get washed——"

"Yes, I was so ashamed of them," declared Marigold, turning red at the remembrance.

Mr. Mann laughed and laughed. Like a picture it came back to him, the incident that had changed so much of his life, given him work and duty and a love he had never known before. He kissed little Tip with great gladness.

"If you folks don't come to breakfast it'll all be spiled!" announced big Lide.

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There was not much Christmas keeping at Denby except in the way of big family dinners, and that interfered with a morning service. But in the afternoon there was a small attempt, prayers and some Christmas hymns and distribution of books. On this afternoon there was quite

a concourse. And after the benediction everybody crowded up around the minister.

"Wasn't it the most astonishing thing!" began Mrs. Deacon Silsby. "I declare you could have knocked me down with a feather. What was it like? And they say the man's rich! He oughter be to take them eight children just as they're getting to be the biggest expense. Do tell us all about it!"

"It was a very pretty wedding," said Mrs. Burnham. "Mr. Mann came over on Tuesday and engaged husband. We were dreadfully surprised and could hardly believe it, but he said they had only been engaged three weeks, though he had known them since last summer. He sent Chan to the hospital, you know. The house is large and well furnished, right on the most stylish avenue. There was only his business partner and wife, but some one had attended to the dressing, and the children were a pretty sight. I never saw Bessy Firth look so young or so pretty. And Mr. Mann seems so proud of them all, and just as happy as if he was twenty-five."

"Seems a shame though when there's so many nice girls around wanting husbands that a widow with a raft of children should carry off the prize. She's good forty."

“Thirty-eight and he is forty-five, so they are well matched. He will have a smart, thrifty, pleasant-tempered wife.”

“And I say Bessy Firth deserved it all. Think how she’s kept all those children together when folks thought she ought to put some of them out, and they’re quite as good as the common run. And she never was complaining how hard her lot was and sort of begging for help. She worked cheerfully and did you a good day’s work too, and she could turn her hand to anything. It’s too bad she should have had the twins, but she never seemed to think children a hardship. And Mr. Beers said that oldest boy was a smart little chap. He wanted to keep him the rest of the winter, but she said Mr. Mann wasn’t willing. She had to tell him of course, and he was clear beat.”

“Stepfathers are fine in the beginning, but they don’t always hold out,” said another. “And it’s my opinion, and I’ve seen a good deal of the world, that two or three years from this time some of them will be shifting for themselves. Then men lose their fortunes. You’re born but you ain’t buried, and a good many things may happen before you are.”

“I don’t think it was just the thing to be so

sly about it. We were all her friends, and she might have needed a little advice. He must have bought her wedding clothes, for I don't believe she had anything. And though I don't hold much to weddin' gifts, I'd 'a' sent her something if I'd known it."

It certainly was a bomb cast into the camp of Denby, and gave food for no end of gossip. But the fact was unalterable. Bessie Firth with her eight children had married a rich man.

Grafton was mightily exercised as well. Dan had to admit the marriage of the boss, and the eight children. And when Mr. Mann went down to the city early the next week, several of the men on the train congratulated him.

"You were a pretty brave fellow," said Mr. Upham, "to shoulder so much responsibility."

"I wanted the children as well as their mother," was the frank reply.

But when the card club met on the last day of the year the playing was decidedly poor, though they laid it to the wretched hands they held.

"To think when Linden Avenue has always been kept select and refined," said Mrs. Greer, "that we should have this raft dumped upon us. Denby people are the very commonest order of

folks, most of them doing their own washing and dyeing their old clothes over in the fall. And this woman worked round, I heard."

"She taught school before she was married the first time."

"Well, it didn't need much education to teach school sixteen or eighteen years ago, and I dare say she has forgotten all that. But we do not need to take her up. He hasn't been what you'd call a sociable sort of man, though the men seem to like him."

"Pity me," besought Mrs. Chedister. "There is not so much space between our houses, and my little girl will have to hear that rough, common talk. I've been so very particular with her. And those children were awful that day last summer. It makes me sick at heart. The avenue has been so really elegant."

"There ought to be some restrictions on property. No one should be allowed in who has more than two children. There are plenty of other streets where they can buy or rent."

"But Mr. Mann had none when he came. We couldn't have fenced him out," remarked one lady laughingly. "Though I detest a neighborhood full of children."

"We'll send them to Coventry and keep them

there. Let us refrain from the slightest advances."

"But suppose they should have the effrontery to give a reception."

"That would be horrid. Some of us must arrange for a party on that same night."

"Capital."

"And if he had only married some nice young woman what an acquisition it might have been. I'm not sure that widows with families ought to be allowed to marry. They've had their day. Oh, did you ever see such wretched luck! The cards seem fairly bewitched!"

"And we are upset by this horrid occurrence. No greater misfortune could have happened."

Oh, Adonijah Mann, you little knew what a commotion your eight children were stirring up!

But both Mr. Mann and the children had a faculty for being equal to the occasion, and we shall learn all about it in the next volume, which will be called "The Children at Grafton."

THE END

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